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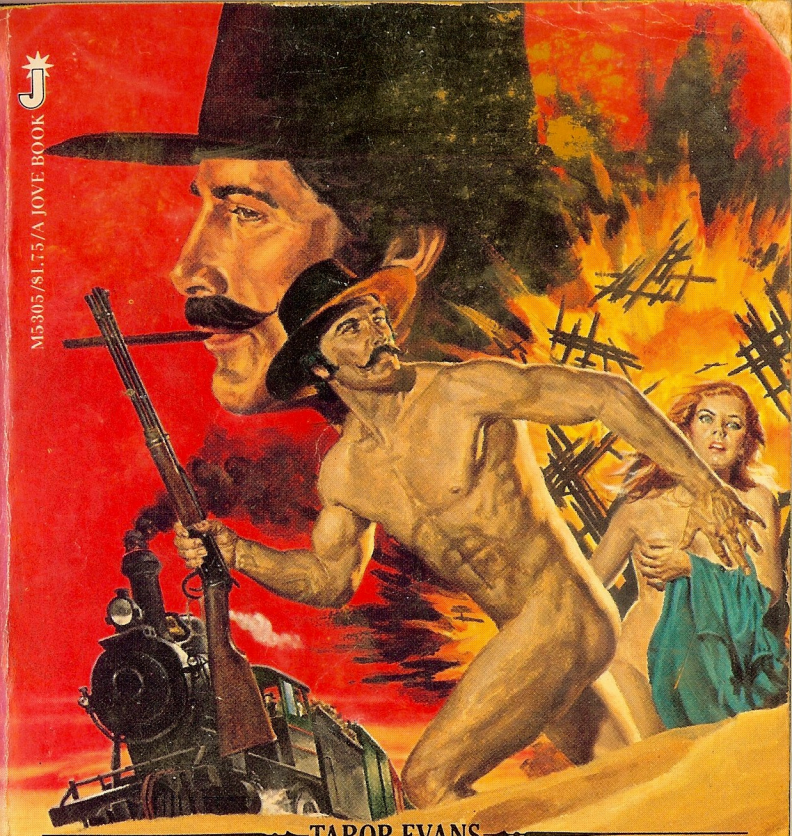

TABOR EVANS

LONGARM RIDES THE BURNING DUNES IN SEARCH OF AN OUTLAW COMMUNE—AND ITS KILLER QUEEN BEE!

13

LONGARM

IN THE SAND HILLS

HE TOOK HER IN HIS ARMS AND KISSED HER . . .

She started to struggle just a bit, went limp in his arms, and responded warmly. As they came up for air, she giggled and murmured, "That mustache tickles."

"The Mexican gals say a kiss without a mustache is like an egg without salt."

Then he picked her up, carried her over to the bed, and lowered her to the covers as she gasped, "What do you think you're doing?"

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LONGARM

IN THE SAND HILLS

TABOR EVANS

A JOVE BOOK

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Chapter 1

Longarm knew he was going to be late to the office again. It was a subject to ponder as he strode the streets of Denver in the early-morning rush. The booming town was getting famous for its traffic jams since they'd put in those new streetcar lines without bothering to widen or even pave a few downtown streets. But Longarm didn't think his boss would accept that as an excuse. There'd been a right interesting tie-up involving a brewery wagon, a coach-and-four, and a horsedrawn streetcar at the corner of Colfax and Broadway. But if he told Marshal Vail he'd stopped to assist the Denver P. D. in putting down the riot, his boss would likely want to know how come he'd been over on that side of the Federal Building when they both knew he roomed almost a mile in the other direction.

Longarm grinned wistfully under his Longhorn mustache as he thought of the redhead he'd just said goodbye to over on Colfax and Sherman. Marshal Vail was a married man, so he likely knew how a gent could lose track of the time when he was busy in bed in the morning. But the one time he'd offered the excuse, the boss had cussed him forwards and backwards, and sent home for more bad words.

That wasn't why he was late, anyway. He packed an Ingersoll watch that kept fair time, and he'd never been late getting anywhere important. It was obvious as hell what the sneaky part of his head was doing. He kept getting to work late because his job bored the shit out of him.

It wasn't the fieldwork he minded. In the six or

eight years he'd been working for the Justice Department, he'd had some interesting times chasing folks. But Washington kept sending more and more fool paperwork every week, and being a peace officer these days was getting to be just another fuddy-duddy trade. You weren't allowed to just go out and pistolwhip the law into folks, these days. You had to fill out at least three fool forms every time you shot an outlaw, and Longarm's big rawboned hands had never been designed to play a typewriter.

Longarm legged it across Welton Street in the bright morning, and caught a glimpse of himself in a plate-glass store window. It was embarrassing as hell. For the last couple of years, Justice had insisted that he report for work in a suit and tie, and he thought he looked like one of those sissy dudes from back East who likely had to sit down to pee.

He was wrong, of course. Longarm's tall, muscular frame was no more suited to the brown tweed ready-made suit he wore than his big fists were to the office typewriter. Anyone who'd ever seen a cowboy could have spotted the way he walked in his low-heeled army boots. Any cowboy would have identified the crush of his dark brown Stetson as that of a Colorado rider. Most lawmen cast at least a thoughtful look at the way the tall deputy's frock coat hung. Though Longarm wore his cross-draw rig under the coat, his double-action Colt .44 was a man-sized weapon, and the bulge it created was not easy to conceal.

Longarm found himself striding faster as he approached the side entrance of the Federal Building. He was only forty-odd minutes late, and if he kept it under an hour, Marshal Vail wouldn't bother with the paperwork it took to dock a man for being a mite tardy.

Inside the building, Longarm tried to look invisible as he strode the marble floors of the stairwells and corridors. On the top floor, he rounded a corner and almost ran over a flustered little secretary gal going somewhere with a sheaf of papers. He reached out to steady her as he smiled and said, "Sorry, ma'am, I

wasn't looking where I was going. Was that your toe I just stomped?"

The girl flushed and dimpled as their eyes met, and Longarm saw that she was sort of pretty behind her glasses. She said, "I'm wearing stout shoes, praise the Lord. Aren't you Marshal Long?"

"I am Custis Long and I am only a deputy. My boss, Billy Vail, is the U.S. Marshal for this district."

"I'm Susan Honeypepper, and I work in the secretarial pool just down the corridor from you."

He said, "Well, I'm proud to meet up with you, Miss Susan, and I'd like to stay and jaw some, but I'm already late for work, so, since I can see I didn't bust your foot, I'll say adios and be on my way."

"Another time?" she suggested, looking away as she turned a deeper shade of red.

Longarm sighed to himself as he strode on. She'd been a handsome little thing, but damn it, she worked under the same roof as he did. Since the fool government had started hiring gals, it was getting distracting as well as tedious around here. Thank God Billy Vail was an old-fashioned boss who didn't see fit to clutter up his own office with feminine help. Of course, that young fellow who was Vail's receptionist and office clerk walked sort of funny and looked like he shaved once a week, but at least he didn't give the other help a hard-on during business hours.

Longarm reached the door and grasped the handle. He tugged, then muttered, "What the hell?"

The door was locked.

For a moment, Longarm thought he'd somehow made a mistake. Billy Vail had never been late to work in living memory, and even if the boss had been run over by a streetcar, the prissy clerk had the annoying habit of reporting to work five minutes early to open up.

But the gilt lettering on the door still read, UNITED STATES MARSHAL, FIRST DISTRICT COURT OF COLORADO. So Longarm tugged again, then knocked. There was no answer.

Grinning like a kid swiping apples, Longarm reached

in his pants pocket for his jackknife. One of the folding blades had been filed down in a way that could have led to his arrest if he hadn't been a peace officer himself. He picked the lock and went inside.

The outer office was empty. Longarm crossed to the door leading to the inner office and picked that lock too. Then he went into Billy Vail's inner sanctum and sat down in the red morocco leather overstuffed chair by Vail's desk. As he leaned back, crossed his legs, and took out a smoke, he glanced out the window and saw the gold dome of the State House up on Capitol Hill, shining in the morning sun. He lit a sulfur match with his thumbnail, and applied it to the end of his cheroot as he swung his eyes along the oak paneling to the banjo clock across the office. Good God, it was almost nine. Where in thunder *was* everybody?

He'd smoked his cheroot a third of the way down when he heard the door behind him open. Marshal William Vail clumped in on his short, stubby legs, moved around behind the desk, and dropped a flat cardboard box on the big green blotter before he sat down and said, "Longarm, you're late."

Longarm glanced at the clock, blew a thoughtful smoke ring, and replied, "Do tell? I've been here some time, pondering the way you boys have been shirking on the taxpayers' time. I didn't know you were keeping banker's hours these days, Chief."

Vail swore under his breath and said, "Don't shit me, you tall drink of innocent water. You know damn well this office opens at eight. I've only been out of this place a few minutes. But spare me the fool excuses. As long as you've seen fit to grace us by your presence at all, I've got a field job for you. Take a look at these photographs."

As Longarm leaned forward, Vail handed him a sheaf of glossy paper prints, warning, "Careful, they're still a mite damp. I've just come from the photographer down the street. My clerk's still down there. We're putting the old glass plates on paper with that new

process some jasper in New York State just developed. Ain't they pretty?"

Longarm glanced down at the first photograph, grimaced, and replied, "Not hardly. I just ate breakfast."

The picture was that of a little girl about six or seven years of age. He could see she'd been dead at least a month when they'd photographed her, and it appeared that she'd died in an ugly manner.

The pathetic little cadaver still wore pigtails and a soggy-looking print dress. The flesh had fallen away from the bones of her face, and her open mouth and empty eye sockets were filled with dried mud. You couldn't tell if the child had been pretty or not, but for some reason, the perfect, pearly little teeth in the silently screaming mouth seemed more obscene than then the other, more ruined parts of her.

Longarm noticed that his cheroot tasted brassy as he set the first print aside and studied the photographed remains of an adult male. The second face was skeletonized and muddy, too. The skull was misshapen, as if it had been stomped flat. From somewhere in the distance, Vail was saying, "The old sepia prints don't show fine detail, and the originals on glass are untidy to keep in the files. This new process should make it easier to keep up to date."

Longarm didn't answer. The third picture was that of a cadaver in a less advanced state of decay, and thus more horrible to look at. Vail saw that he'd come to it and said, "That one's a Dr. William York. He's one of the only ones identified for sure. His brother recognized the remains."

"His brother likely had a strong stomach. What's this all about, Billy? Have you been out to the burial grounds with your box camera? You've got almost a dozen very dead folks here. I haven't read anything in the papers about another Indian rising or a mass murder."

Vail looked pleased with himself as he said, "Sure you have. It was even in the *London Times*. But you've

likely forgot the case. It happened six or eight years ago, about the time you started working for us."

Longarm leafed through the other photos, saw they were all just as unpleasant to look at, and said, "Six or eight years is an old case for sure. Who killed these folks and where are you fixing to send me?"

"Nebraska. Up in the Sand Hill country near the South Dakota line. You know the territory?"

"Sure, it's cattle country. Mostly federally owned open range. But these folks weren't killed and buried in the Sand Hills, Billy. The soil clinging to their bones is clay loam."

"I admire a lawman who can read sign, even if he seldom sees fit to get to work on time. Those folks were murdered over on the Osage Trail in southeast Kansas, near a settlement called Cherryvale."

Longarm snapped his fingers and said flatly, "The Terrible Benders! I remember the case now."

"I should think you would. Every lawman in the country wasted a couple of years trying to collect that two-thousand-dollar reward. You were down near the border after those Mexican raiders at the time, but I sent you a wanted flier. Everyone from the Pinkertons to Wild Bill Hickok got one. It was a really nasty mess. That little gal was riding with her father when the Benders killed them. As far as the coroner could make out, they smashed the father's head in, then threw the kid in on top of his corpse and buried her alive."

Longarm nodded and said, "I remember that part. I was sore enough *without* these pictures to look at! I was sort of busy with that Mexican gang, but I purely studied everybody else I met up with for a time. I disremember spotting anyone answering to the descriptions on the wanted fliers though, and to tell you the truth, the whole thing's sort of faded from my mind. You'd best fill me in some before I light out after the rascals. I've hunted a lot of owlhoots since. I've got a damn good picture in my head of Frank and Jesse James, and I reckon I'd know Mysterious Dave Mather

if I met him in a dark alley. But I figured the Terrible Benders must have been caught by this time."

Vail said, "They were never caught. I'd best tell you the tale from scratch, and let you start caught up fresh. The Terrible Benders were a family of four. Nobody knows where they came from, or if Bender was their real name. They were some sort of foreigners. Some say they were German, and some allow they might have been gypsies. There was Old Man Bender; he spoke poor English and answered to the name of John. His wife was Ma Bender. She was in her fifties, and spoke even less English. They had two kids: a boy called Junior, about twenty-five, and a daughter called Pretty Kate. She was the only one who spoke with no accent and seemed to have any brains worth mention. All four of them were big. They say the daughter was nigh six foot tall and her brother and daddy towered over her. We have a picture of Kate Bender here. The others were camera-shy."

Vail took another print from the box, and handed it across the desk. Longarm stared thoughtfully down at the picture of a surprisingly pretty brunette with big, innocent dark eyes and a slight Mona Lisa smile as Vail explained, "She gave her picture to a boyfriend—a storekeeper from Cherryvale. He was good enough to come forward with it once he learned he'd been sparking a lunatic who went in for mass murder on the nights he didn't come courting. He likely had some spooky dreams about her, for a time."

Longarm said, "She don't look like a six-foot amazon."

"Well, she was, and a head-turning handsome woman to boot. She might have been the brains of the outfit, but that ain't saying much. The Benders' neighbors hadn't suspicioned what they were up to, of course, until it was too late. But later they remembered that even Kate had seemed a mite spooky. She read tea leaves and held spirit-rapping sessions for the neighbor ladies and told more than one that she had occult powers. At the time, they thought she was funning. She didn't *look* like a real witch."

"Get to the murders. The Benders ran a boarding-house or something, didn't they?"

"No. It was a trail stop between Cherryvale and Thayer, Kansas. It was really just a one-room cabin, divided in the middle by a canvas partition. The family lived in one half of the cabin; the other half was fitted out as a dining room. Folks coming up the Osage Trail to the railroad at Cherryvale stopped there to water their mounts and rest a spell. The Benders served bad coffee and awful beans at an outrageous price. So few folks stopped more than once, and business must have been slow. Lucky travelers made their way past the Bender cabin and only remembered it as a place to be avoided. Folks dropping by alone at night, when no other folks were on the trail, weren't as lucky. We know for sure that at least eleven folks who stopped for grub and water were murdered and robbed by the crazy family. There might have been more. The grand jury figured they had enough to go on after the posse dug up eleven graves in and about the cabin."

Longarm nodded and said, "I remember how they did it now. It was that canvas wall. The victim would be seated at the table with his back to the partition. While the women served him, one of the Bender men crept behind the canvas with a nine-pound sledge. The girl would suddenly shove the poor bastard backwards, chair and all, and the sledge was aimed at the bulge in the partition."

Vail nodded and said, "Yep. Later they found traces of blood and brains on the canvas. They got away with it for about a year. Then this Dr. York vanished on the trail, and his family took the time to trace his movements. York had been packing an engraved watch, and when it turned up in a Cherryvale hock shop, the dead man's brother rode out to the trail stop to ask how come Junior Bender had pawned it."

Vail shook his head in wonder as he added, "The Lord protects drunks and other fools, I reckon. The brother should have been victim number twelve. But it was broad daylight and some hands were driving a

herd to the railroad as he jawed with Kate in her dooryard. She said her brother wasn't home and invited him in for some coffee."

"Jesus, he didn't go inside with her, did he?"

"Not hardly. He's still alive. He got suspicious of the wild look in the big gal's eyes and said he'd come back later. She took him by one arm and tried to lead him in, allowing they might have some fun while her kinfolks were away. He lit out like he'd just shook hands with the devil, which was pretty close to the truth, when you think about it. Kate cussed him as the passing cowhands reined in to see what all the fuss was about. But she couldn't stop the dead man's brother from riding off with them."

"Where did he go then? To the law?"

"Hell, yes. Where would *you* have gone? He tore into Cherryvale and got the sheriff. The sheriff had already heard some spooky talk about the new folks out on the trail, so he gathered a posse and rode back with the dead man's brother. He was a good lawman. When the posse arrived, there was nobody home and everything looked peaceable. But the sheriff threw well water on the dirt floor of the cabin, and as it started to dry a mite, he ordered his men to dig where the packed dirt stayed damp. They found bodies under the dining table, and more out back. Like I said, they quit when they uncovered eleven, including Dr. York."

Longarm grimaced and said, "Meanwhile, they let the whole murderous crew ride off into the purple sunset?"

"Hell, Longarm, it was open country. How far could four giants get? The sheriff sent men to cover the railroad and put the tale on the telegraph wires in every direction. He figured that building an airtight case against the Benders was more important at the time. He hauled in the gal's boyfriend, put a noose about his neck, and questioned shit out of him. The storekeeper was scared skinny and told the little we really know about the Benders. In the end they decided he was clean. He admitted screwing Kate Bender

more'n the law allowed, but he had alibis for the dates the sheriff found important."

Longarm asked, "Storekeeper, huh? Wouldn't a store be a handy place to get rid of stolen goods?"

"They thought of that. He didn't have anything for sale that he couldn't account for, legal. Besides, the dead man's watch had been pawned miles away by Junior Bender. They naturally suspected the man, and kept an eye on him for a few years. But he got married after a while and moved on."

"Then nobody knows where he is today?"

"Hell, of course we do. He only moved away from the scandal, not out of the state. Every once in a while some lawman drops by to pay him a visit. They say it upsets his wife and kids. I got his name somewhere in the files if you want it."

Longarm shook his head and said, "Sounds like a waste of time, if he's stuck to the same tale all these years and he ain't in Nebraska. What makes you think the Terrible Benders are up in the Sand Hill country, Billy?"

Vail handed him a Western Union flimsy, saying, "This came in the other day from Deputy Harcourt. He's that kid they just sent us from back East and, as you can see, a fool."

HAVE SPOTTED SUSPECTS ANSWERING DESCRIPTION KATE AND JUNIOR BENDER WANTED FOR MURDER IN KANSAS STOP PLEASE ADVISE RE FEDERAL JURISDICTION SIGNED HARCOURT U. S. DEPUTY MARSHAL

Longarm frowned and asked, "That's all? He doesn't even say what township he saw them in!"

Vail sighed and said, "I know. I don't know where the department gets 'em these days. Harcourt was sent up there on another case, of course. He sent that wire from Bridgeport, on the North Platte. He was traveling on the Burlington Line, and as you see, he didn't say if he spotted the Benders aboard the train, in town

as he stopped off to eat, or standing on their heads in the river."

"You wired back, of course?"

"Hell, no. I just sat here like a big-ass bird," Vail said with a wry look. "Of course I wired! I wired every lawman within a day's ride from Bridgeport while I was about it. What in hell do you reckon Harcourt meant by 'federal jurisdiction'?"

"I'll ask him when I catch up with him. Offhand, I'd say he's over-educated to be packing a badge this far west. He's new on the job and likely wondered if a federal lawman could arrest a suspect on a Kansas state warrant."

"Shit, any lawman can arrest anybody that any other lawman wants. Everybody knows that!"

"Harcourt didn't. When he spotted the Benders—if he really did—he likely got arresting powers mixed up with extradition and such. It's a natural mistake for a green hand. Where is Harcourt now?"

"I wish to hell I knew. He was supposed to pick up a government mount at Fort Robinson before riding into the Sand Hills. The army remount people say he never got to Fort Robinson."

Longarm whistled silently and observed, "In other words, one of our men is missing, right after reporting at least two wanted killers."

"There's no other words about it, Longarm. Nobody's seen hide nor hair of Harcourt since he got off the train in Bridgeport. Where do you aim to start looking?"

Longarm thought before he said, "Let's eat the apple a bite at a time. There's a mess of open country between Bridgeport and Fort Robinson. Can I figure the Bridgeport law has poked about some for our long-lost greenhorn?"

"Of course. If he's a day's ride from Bridgeport he's buried deep. He could be anywhere between the Platte and the Sand Hills, alive or otherwise. I know I've given you a hard row to hoe, old son, but it seemed like such a simple job that I never thought to send an experienced deputy."

Longarm nodded and asked, "What *did* Harcourt go up there to do, if it wasn't to look for the Terrible Benders?"

Vail said, "I sent him up near Sunbonnet, Nebraska, to evict some squatters on federal property. You know already that the Sand Hills are open range. Uncle Sam has put that corner of Nebraska off-limits to homesteaders. The government stands to collect more in grazing fees than it'll ever get in taxes from a blown-away farm. Bust the sod on them big rolling hills up yonder and . . ."

"I know you can't farm the sandhill country, Billy. Fill me in on these here squatters Harcourt was sent to evict."

Vail shrugged and said, "It's another one of those damn fool Utopian communities. The outfit calls itself the Church of Ancestral Wisdom. I swear, I don't know what this country is coming to. First we had the Mormons and Mennonites and such. Now we're getting even wilder folk with funny notions out here. The old-time religion has always been good enough for lots of folks, but now we got Owenites and Marxists and folks who want to build octagonal houses to read Darwin in instead of the Good Book. What in thunder's wrong with a square house? I've lived in 'em all my life and it's never hurt me."

"Let's stick to this Church of Ancestral Wisdom. What are they doing up in the Sand Hills, Billy?"

"Beats hell out of me. You sure can't grow crops there, and they ain't running cows. These jaspers picked up some fool notions from them Fox sisters back East. They say they live by revelations from their dead ancestors."

"You mean they're part of the spiritualist movement?"

"Yep. They wear funny duds and talk to haunts. The cattlemen up there say they spook the livestock and practice free love while fencing off the only water for miles. I sent Harcourt up there with a federal judgment, ordering them to jaw with spirits and screw each other someplace else. Some of the local cattlemen have

offered to evict the sect a mite more informal, but we don't want vigilantes on federal property, either."

Longarm nodded and said, "I'll keep these pictures. I'll need another copy of the eviction papers, the usual travel vouchers, and such."

"Don't you aim to look for Harcourt first?"

"Nope. Like you said, he could be most anywhere in a mess of open range. I figure the best move, right now, is for me to just take over his mission and see who tries to stop me."

Vail said, "Hell, it seems obvious enough that he stumbled over another case, got spotted by the Terrible Benders, and—"

"Back up and restudy what you're saying, Billy," Longarm cut in, going on to explain, "Harcourt's only been out here a few months. He was just a kid when the Bender case was in the papers. He might have really recognized Kate Bender. He might have made a mistake. It's sort of odd they'd be spotted so easy by a green kid when no experienced lawman has managed to catch sight of 'em for all these years."

"Ain't you forgetting something, Longarm? Kate Bender was interested in spiritualism!"

Longarm nodded and said, "I'm way ahead of you on that. Sure, a new bunch of table-rappers living out in the middle of nowhere might attract a gal like Kate Bender. On the other hand, Harcourt must have been thinking along the same lines. He was on the prod to look for folks who dabbled with spirits, from the time you sent him north, all hot and bothered, on his first field case."

"You mean, if folks start looking for ghosts, they're likely to see 'em? All right, let's say he just saw a big pretty lady answering to Kate Bender's description. If she and the other giant with her weren't really Benders, why is Harcourt missing?"

Longarm got to his feet, saying, "Don't know. There's nothing to tell us Harcourt was done in by the suspects he reported. I can think of a dozen ways a federal man could get in trouble up in that neck of the woods. The Sand Hills are rough country, Billy. Leav-

ing aside owlhoots hiding out up there, the Sioux are sulking on the Pine Ridge Reservation just to the north. The price of beef is high this summer. Cow thieves get to humming around the herds out on the open range like flies, whenever the price of beef goes up."

Vail grimaced and said, "I follow your drift. It ain't like a strange lawman is a popular visitor, on the job or off."

Longarm grinned and said, "There you go. I've had folks try to gun me right here on the streets of Denver. Anybody could have had it in for Harcourt."

"Maybe, but I still cotton to the notion of Kate Bender being interested in that spiritualist bunch, Longarm."

Longarm said, "I aim to keep that in mind. But if she's joined the commune, I'll likely notice. How many six-foot beautiful women do you reckon there might be, even in a free love society?"

Longarm sat with his back to the rear bulkhead of the Burlington coach, reading the book he'd picked up at the public library before boarding the train. The book had been written a few years back by a reporter who claimed to have talked to Colonel York, the brother of the dead doctor whose murder had led the law to the Terrible Benders.

The old federal files hadn't mentioned the man as a colonel, but they hadn't said he wasn't one. The colonel in the book seemed to have played a more important part in the investigation than the official report said he did, to hear *him* tell it.

In fact, the popular version was exciting as all hell, with the colonel paying visit after visit to the Bender spread and living to tell about it. He had himself playing fancy games with the whole murderous clan, even though Vail's version had them down as illiterate white trash who spoke in grunts. There was the same picture of Pretty Kate Bender, but a lot of facts failed to add up. According to the colonel, he'd not only solved the case, he'd led the posse and told them where to dig.

The book was filled with gory but dubious details, such as that the one-room cabin had a deep, dark basement with blood-spattered walls. Longarm didn't think it was worth a side trip to Kansas to see if a one-room shack had been built with a full cellar by people content with interior partitions made of canvas. The sheriff's version was likely self-serving, too.

As the wheels clacked under him, he tried to picture the mysterious family. There was something wrong with every version he'd gone over. The popular version had the Benders lighting out with a herd of cattle, for God's sake. According to the sheriff, the posse had missed catching the family by minutes. The colonel had them with a two or three days' lead as he moved heaven and earth to interest the law in his missing brother. Was Kate Bender the articulate, well-dressed gal who'd advertised herself as a spiritualist and fortune-teller in the Kansas papers, or the half-wild she-brute other travelers had reported as snarling at them like an animal?

He was beginning to see why they'd never been caught. Everyone in Kansas had given a different description of the infamous family!

They could have been semi-prosperous German immigrants who kept a store and a herd of cattle; they could have been grunting savages living like gypsies in one-half of a tiny cabin reeking with blood and brains; it was hard to fathom how they could have been both.

Once the story had broken and the little town of Cherryvale was flooded by reporters from the outside world, everyone who'd ever heard of the Benders, and likely some who'd never met them, had given their own version with all the trimmings they could think of.

He saw that the writer of the book had his own theory as to why they'd never been caught. He suggested that the posse *had* caught up with them, but, enraged by the terrible crimes they'd uncovered, the possemen had killed the whole bunch, saving Kate for last and burning her as a witch while she spat defiant curses at them. Naturally, they'd then sworn to keep the deed a secret among them. It was dramatic as hell,

and it made good reading, but the writer had forgotten two things.

Two thousand dollars was a lot of money. Any member of the posse who had the slightest notion where the Benders could be found, dead or alive, had purely kept an expensive secret. The second thing wrong with the notion was that the posse had been *sent* to find them. They were wanted for at least eleven murders. What was to stop any lawman from killing all four of them and bragging his head off about it? If a whole posse could keep *anything* a secret, it would have been simple enough to agree that the Benders had died "resisting arrest."

So the book was just another penny-dreadful, like most of the nonsense Eastern writers made up about anything west of the Hudson. Like all the men poor James Butler Hickok was said to have gunned, or like the man Billy the Kid was supposed to have killed at the age of twelve, or like a hundred other similar yarns. The reporters hadn't allowed any tedious facts to get in the way of an exciting detail or two.

He closed the book and put it in the saddlebag beside him on the plush seat. His McClellan saddle and bridle rode ahead of him in the baggage car, but he'd learned the hard way to keep his possibles and Winchester .44 in sight while traveling the rails, and though the book was of no use to anyone, the library likely expected him to return it.

He fished out a cheroot and lit up as he gazed out the window at the passing scenery. The sunset was painting the rolling prairie orange and lavender, and they'd be getting into Bridgeport soon. He'd lay over for the night there, just in case Harcourt might have left some trace the local law had overlooked.

Up ahead of him in the car, a woman got up from her seat and made her way toward the privy at the far end. Longarm gazed admiringly at her hindquarters as she moved gracefully in time with the swaying floorboards. He knew what she looked like from the front; he'd had an eye on her since she'd boarded the train with him back in Denver. So far, she hadn't offered him

any opportunity to strike up a conversation and, what the hell, he'd be getting off in a few minutes.

When the woman was almost to the narrow corridor leading to the privy and forward platform, a lean man with hunched shoulders slithered from his own seat to head the same way.

Longarm had been keeping an eye on him too. He was that chinless jasper who'd tried to start a conversation with the lady a while back, and been cut off at the kneees with a withering look. There was just one privy, for use by both men and women, with a door that locked from the inside. It had only one hole, and Longarm couldn't see any civilized reason why a gent should be following a lady in that direction. So he sighed wearily and got to his own feet.

By the time he'd sauntered the length of the car, both of them were out of sight around the bend of the corridor opening. He kept going, and as he passed the door to the privy, he saw that it was unoccupied. The seat sat invitingly with the railroad ties whipping by under the squat-and-drop-it. He didn't have to go, so he eased on up to the platform between cars.

The gal he'd thought might need protecting stood on the platform, facing his way. She was a nicely built ash blonde, wearing a Paris hat and a floor-length linen travel-duster. She pointed the Colt Dragoon in her hand at Longarm's belt buckle and asked, "Whose side are you on, mister?"

Longarm said, "Yours. I'm a man with honorable intentions and I saw you were being trailed by a man who needed a shave and a bath."

She smiled and said, "I noticed. He just got off the train."

Longarm stared soberly at the telegraph poles whipping past and said, "Do tell? I didn't hear no shots."

The blonde said, "He got off voluntary, when I shoved my pistol up his nose. I thank you for such kind notions as you might have had on my behalf, but I can take care of myself."

"I stand corrected, ma'am. I didn't know you were such a tough lady."

"I don't know as I'm tough, but I can get *mean* as hell when folks pester me. But the war is over and my back teeth are floating, so if you don't mean to use that privy behind you, I'll thank you to stand aside."

Longarm laughed, touched the brim of his Stetson, and turned away to resume his seat. He received some odd looks from the other passengers as he went back down the aisle, but he didn't volunteer any information as to why three people had just headed all at once for a one-holer.

Sitting down again, he took the railroad timetable and the folded Land Office map from the saddlebag for a last look before he got off. Just what Billy Vail's clerk had in mind by sending first Harcourt and now himself by this particular route was a mystery. Had it been up to Longarm, he'd have been headed nowhere near Fort Robinson to pick up a mount before riding east into the Sand Hill country. The vast and vaguely mapped sandhills occupied almost a third of Nebraska, but the fort stood on the higher plains well west of the grass-covered dunes. There was no railroad within two days' ride of the X on the map that they'd aimed Harcourt at, but Fort Robinson was even farther. Longarm placed two forked fingers on the map between the army outpost and the mysterious commune, then placed them on the scale at the bottom of the map. He swore softly to himself as he gauged the distance. The squatters on federal range were nearly sixty miles away from the fort. He couldn't find a railroad stop within forty. The fool settlers had picked out a damned inconvenient place to get to. He started to trace a better route from Bridgeport with his finger and, sure enough, the clerk should have routed him east from Crawford on the C.N.W. and . . . No, that wouldn't work either. There just wasn't any civilized way to get there without a mess of lonesome riding.

He checked the timetable, saw that they were already supposed to be in Bridgeport, and put the papers away. He had no sensible choice in any case, so his best bet was to just chase the missing Harcourt all around Robin Hood's barn until he caught up with him. With

luck, the religious commune would be within a dozen miles of the X on the map. If that fool clerk had it in the wrong county, all bets were off and the papers he had to serve were worthless.

He ran that through a second time before he dismissed it. Whether Harcourt had been on a fool's errand or not was less important than why he hadn't gotten there. Fort Robinson was nowhere near the commune, but unless he'd started out from there on horseback, he'd never have made it close enough to matter. Nobody *walks* sixty miles across the sandhills in high summer.

The hardcase blonde came back from the privy, her eyes downcast and the gun probably stuffed in the big purse she packed. She wasn't concealing it under that linen duster; the duster was too tight on her hourglass figure. Longarm noticed she was a mite tall for a female, and once again he felt something click in his head. Then he smiled sheepishly at his own fool notion. Kate Bender's description could have been off by a few inches, and dark hair could be bleached, but the pistol-packing lady had eyes as blue as cornflowers and she looked nothing like the old photograph, even allowing for six or eight years and a poor likeness to begin with.

The blonde must have thought he was smiling at her, but it didn't make her pull her gun again. Instead, she came on down to where he was sitting, grabbed the brass handle of the seat ahead of him as he half-rose, and pulled the movable backrest forward to form a seat facing his. She sat down without an invitation and said, "I'm Victoria Roundtree and I own the Diamond M, thanks to the Sioux. They lifted my late husband's hair three years ago this summer."

Longarm said, "My handle is Custis Long, but I don't brag about it. I'm sorry to hear about your late husband, ma'am. Likely the Sioux are sorry too. They keep complaining that the army is picking on them."

She shrugged and said, "I'm sorry if I seemed testy up there, just now. You met up with me at a bad moment, but I had time to study on it as I . . . Never

mind. I truly want to thank you for rushing to my rescue like that. I admire gents with decent manners. Are you a gambler or a hired gun, Mr. Long?"

He started to explain that he was a lawman, but decided to drift with her notions until he saw where they might be leading. He watched her eyes as he said, "I don't gamble all that much, ma'am."

She looked relieved and said, "I didn't think you was a tinhorn. I noticed the way you walked when you got on the train back in Denver. Who did you work cows for, before you found out the advantages of being better known as a shooter?"

He smiled crookedly and said, "Oh, I rode here and I rode there, ma'am. I disremember some of the brands. When I'm working cows, I generally like a double-rig Vadelia saddle and I throw tie-down."

"I noticed the High Plains crush to your hat. Are you looking for a job?"

"I've got a job, ma'am, but I'm open to interesting offers."

She nodded and said, "The pay is five dollars a day and all the beans you can eat. I need men who can take care of my stock—or take care of anybody pestering my stock. I told you before, I can see to the safety of my fair white body."

He nodded and said, "In other words, you need working hands who can fight a war for you, should the need arise. Where is this spread of yours, Miss Victoria?"

"Western Sand Hills. The nearest town is called Sunbonnet, and I'd best say up front, it ain't much of a town. I allow my hands to go in once a week, but I fail to see why they bother."

Longarm kept his face blank with an effort as he nodded and said, "I've heard tell of Sunbonnet. Ain't there some sort of newfangled religious commune a few miles north of there? Seems to me I read about Mormons or something moving in around there."

Victoria Roundtree snorted In disgust and said, "You read wrong. They ain't Mormons. They're just plain crazy. They call themselves the Church of

Ancestral-something, and pray to the spirits of the dead. I could tell you some scandalous tales about their other notions, but I never really *saw* them running naked over the dunes, the way some folks say they do."

Longarm digested this information as he reshuffled the deck of his options. It hardly seemed likely that a lady who lived in the neighborhood of Sunbonnet would take the least handy route home. On the other hand, if he threw in with her this side of Fort Robinson, he'd probably never find out what had happened to poor Harcourt.

As if she'd read his mind, she said, "I've got me a buckboard waiting for me at Alliance. I'll be heading home from there alone, as I've been stuck in Denver on business and saw no need to keeep my hands waiting idle until I got back."

Longarm ran the timetable through his memory and put a mental thumb on the town of Alliance. It was the next important stop past Bridgeport, so she wouldn't be getting off with him, damn it.

He said, "You'll be picking up your buckboard at the livery after dark, and you face a long, lonesome trip across the prairie to Sunbonnet, Miss Victoria."

She said, "I know. I'll be alone at least two days or more on the trail, Lord willing and the creeks don't rise. I wasn't worried when I left for Denver, but since then, there's talk in the papers about the Sioux fixing to jump the reservation again, and my foreman wired about cow thieves hitting a neighbor's herd."

"Couldn't you wire your outfit from Alliance and have some riders come to fetch you?"

"Sure I could. Then I'd have to wait there a couple of days for them. I spent a night in the best hotel in Alliance, once. I'd rather spread my bedroll under the stars anytime."

He shrugged and offered no further objections. But she said, "If we could come to terms, your pay would start the minute we left Alliance. I'd feel a lot safer on the trail with you and that Winchester for company, Mr. Long."

He frowned and said, "You don't know me, Miss Victoria."

She smiled, and this time he was sure he was reading the smoke-talk in her eyes correctly as she said, "I'd rather take a chance with a good-looking white man than meet up with a band of painted Injuns. I ain't packing enough money to mention, and we've agreed you're reasonably polite to womenfolk."

He smiled back at her as he mulled over her offer in his mind. If he hitched a ride with her from Alliance, he'd save a hell of a lot of miles. The layover he'd planned just up the line in Bridgeport promised little more than a tedious conversation with the local peace officers, who'd already said they didn't know where Harcourt was.

On the other hand, he was expected at Fort Robinson, and Billy Vail would have a fit if two of his deputies dropped out of sight. There'd be a mount waiting for him at the fort, and there was always the slim chance that the army had heard something about Harcourt. The sensible thing would be to just keep plodding along the way he'd planned.

Victoria said, "If it's the pay you're worried about, I may have been a mite hasty. I'll tell you true, I'm in a bind for the kind of men I need at the Diamond M. I can get cowboys and hired guns almost anywhere. But I admire your style. You walk like a top hand and you handled yourself just right when that saddle tramp was pestering me. You didn't hesitate, but you didn't bluster. When I had a gun trained on you, you stood cool and thoughtful, and I could see you wasn't about to wet your britches. You're just the sort of man I've been looking for to be my segundo, Mr. Long. What do you say?"

Longarm knew he ought to say no. Harcourt hadn't taken the shortcut to Sunbonnet. Not if he'd been following his assigned route. He'd have gone straight up to the northwest corner of Nebraska, picked up a hayburner from the army, then ridden due east a long, lonesome sixty miles. If Harcourt was still alive, or

laying out in plain sight, it made sense to follow his out-of-the-way line of travel.

But what if Harcourt had been offered an easier way to get to the commune? Nobody really knew for sure *where* he'd headed, after sending that wire from Bridgeport.

Longarm said, "There's a layover for eats at the next stop, Miss Victoria. If you give me time to send a couple of telegrams, I might be able to throw in with you as far as Sunbonnet. We can jaw along the way about whether I want the job or not."

She nodded knowingly, and said, "I follow your drift. You aim to see if the folks who sent for you want to top my offer, right?"

He didn't answer.

She lowered her eyes and murmured, "You just go ahead and send your wires. I'm sure I can find some way to make you see fit to ride for me. Nobody in Nebraska pays better than the Diamond M, and there may be other inducements we can work out on the trail."

Chapter 2

It was fairly late that night when the train pulled into Alliance, but you couldn't tell. It was the end of the month, and they'd posted street lamps along the main drag. The hands had just been paid and every saloon was going full blast on either side of the crowded street.

Longarm and Victoria Roundtree both had errands to attend to before they left for her spread near Sunbonnet. No lady could wait for a gent in a saloon, so Victoria's battle plan was for her to check into a hotel, deal with her own chores, and have Longarm pick her up there when he'd finished his own. He could see she was a free spender; even if you didn't aim to spend the night there, the hotel charged a whole dollar for the use of a room.

The hotel, called the Great Electric, was near the depot, so Longarm gave a redcap a quarter and had him carry both Victoria's luggage and his own gear from the baggage room of the depot over to the hotel. As Victoria signed in, Longarm gave the bellhop another quarter to store everything in her hired single. He was sorry he'd been so free with the taxpayers' expense money when he noticed the leer on the bellhop's pimpled face. The kid seemed surprised when they separated in the lobby and she went upstairs alone to freshen up.

Longarm would never know why the hotel called itself the Great Electric. The lobby was gaslit like the rest of the town, and the potted palms weren't doing anything interesting as he left for the Western Union

office next to the depot. The street lamps were gaslit too, and they made Longarm nervous as hell. He was all for Progress, and could see the sense of flush toilets and center-fire ammunition. Maybe someday, when that inventor back in Jersey got his new incandescent lights a mite brighter and a lot cheaper, the idea of electric street lighting would work. The dim, guttering gas flames along Main Street just made the night more dangerous than it needed to be. A man had to walk through puddles of lamplight surrounded by ink-black shadows on every side, and the Saturday night mortality lists had risen alarmingly wherever they'd installed the fool things.

Since he hadn't planned to get off the train in Alliance, Longarm figured he was safe enough as he cut across to the telegraph office. He went in, picked up a yellow blank, and began to compose a message to Marshal Vail.

He knew Billy Vail would be home at this hour, so he took advantage of this. He sent a wire to the marshal's home address, not giving any official titles as he got in touch with "Uncle Billy." He knew he'd catch hell from the accounting department for the nickel a word he was using, but he sent a rambling message, sneaking the drift of his meaning into what seemed to be a discussion of the price of beef at the local stockyards. He knew Billy would figure it out, once he got over thinking his deputy had sent it drunk. He told Billy he was taking a shortcut and would be out of touch for a day or so. He suggested that the marshal wire Sunbonnet if there was any news about "Cousin Fred." Victoria had said that, while there was no rail line to Sunbonnet, there was a Western Union office. Neither he nor Billy Vail had a cousin named Fred, but Billy was smart enough to figure out who they were both worried about. By the time he and Victoria reached the next telegraph office, Vail would have heard something about the missing deputy—if Harcourt was to be found anywhere by all the people who were looking for him. If there was still no word of him by the time he got back in touch with his office,

Longarm would know that his ideas about saving time had been the right move.

The Western Union clerk said he'd save money by sending a night letter, but Longarm told him to send a straight wire. Billy left early for the office, and they'd lose a day if the wire went to his home while he was out.

As Longarm paid and turned from the counter, he found himself facing two men. They'd come in quietly, considering that they were wearing Texas boots. They were both big and husky, wore businesslike gunbelts, and were dressed just a little prouder than the average cowhand could afford. He noticed that the one with the shoulder-length hair had silver conchos set in the hatband of his telescoped Stetson. Neither face connected with any wanted fliers he'd seen recently, so Longarm nodded and said, "It's all yours, gents," as he tried to step away from the counter between them.

They didn't let him. They moved closer together to bar his path, as the one with the fancy hat said, "We ain't done talking with you, mister."

Longarm noticed that both were smiling, although sort of wolfishly, so he smiled back and said, "Talk away, then. Are you boys the law?"

Conchos said, "We'll ask the questions. Who are you, and what are you up to with the widow Roundtree?"

Longarm frowned in seeming puzzlement as he answered, "Taking your questions in order, my handle is Cantrell and I deal in cows. If the widow Roundtree is that lady I escorted to her hotel just now, you must have been watching, for I never met up with her before. As to what I'm doing with her, I ain't. Anyone can see she's checked in alone over there, and I'm standing here jawing with you."

The other gunslick said, "You had your saddle and possibles packed up to her room, mister."

Longarm felt better, knowing he was dealing with direct types who hadn't made a study of the finer points of cross-examination. He nodded and said, "Since you gents must have tipped that bellhop better than I did,

he'll have told you the lady took a single. I asked her to mind my possibles while I attend a few chores before I ride out by myself. You know I'd be dumb to leave my Winchester and saddle laying about just anywhere."

Conchos looked him up and down before he opined, "You ride a sissy McClellan and you wear a shoestring tie, but you pack a man-sized gun under that frock coat. You're either the law or a hired gun. Who'd you just send a wire to?"

"My uncle in Denver, if it's any business of yours."

The gunslick stared thoughtfully at the nervous telegraph clerk and said, "We'll make it our business. Hand that last wire over, boy."

The clerk licked his lips, but he had enough sand in his craw to say, "That ain't allowed, boys. I could lose my job, letting you read private messages."

Conchos drew, so fast that the nickel-plated S&W .45 seemed to come out of its holster like a streak of silver smoke.

But as he trained it on the clerk, Longarm said, "Let him see it, old son. I've nothing to hide, and there's no need for unfriendly feelings."

The clerk handed Longarm's wire over, and as Conchos read it with his gun still in his hand, Longarm chuckled and said, "I'm getting a line on you boys, now. You're kin to that nice-looking widow woman, and you're afraid I'm trying to spark her, right?"

The man holding the message shot him a puzzled frown, as Longarm had hoped he might. His seemingly stupid remark had been aimed at two squirrels on the same branch. He wanted to give the rascal something distracting to think about as he studied the coded wire, and he wanted them to think he was too dumb to recognize them as hired guns.

He'd already decided he could take them, if push came to shove. The one doing all the talking was flashy and overconfident, and while he drew pretty as hell, Longarm had noticed that his gun came out aimed way too high. He'd lowered the muzzle as he'd trained it on the clerk. A really good gunhand drew with his

muzzle aimed below the other man's belt buckle, in order to ride the recoil up the front of his target from crotch to throat. Nickel-plated guns were meant for show, too. If he had to take them, Longarm meant to go for the quiet one first. The quiet member of a team was usually the boss.

The comparatively innocent-looking older one packed a worn double-action Colt Lightning with sanded hard-rubber grips. He was balanced on the balls of his booted feet, too. He'd crab sideways from the counter and fire from one knee, around the rump of his flashy sidekick.

As if to confirm Longarm's suspicions, Conchos read the wire aloud. As he'd intended, there was nothing in it to give either himself or Vail away as anything but cattlemen worried about a relative who'd caught a bad cold in Nebraska. Conchos handed the form back to the clerk, but said, "You say this cousin of yours is in Sunbonnet. We hail from Sunbonnet, and so does Victoria Roundtree."

"Do tell? I think the lady aims to wait here for somebody to come for her. If you ain't them, I'd be proud to ride that way with you. I hear some Sioux are fixing to jump the reservation, and I'd feel safer on the trail with a couple of cowhands who know these parts."

For the first time, the silent one spoke up to say flatly, "If you know what's good for you, mister, you won't be heading for Sunbonnet, with or without Miss Victoria."

Conchos nodded and said, "There's nothing you want in Sunbonnet, Cantrell."

Longarm leaned against the counter on his left elbow, clearing the tail of his coat from the cross-draw holster as he raised his right hand innocently to the cheroot between his teeth. He didn't want to have to explain a shooting to the local law if he could help it. He wanted to ride into Sunbonnet as an unknown stranger and see what folks had to say before he flashed a badge. On the other hand, these jaspers were past cautious conversation, and had entered the area of

impolite threats. Longarm didn't care if they thought he was yellow, but he was going to Sunbonnet with Victoria Roundtree, and he thought it might be best to have it out here and now, instead of exposing her to the danger of a confrontation on the trail.

He took the cigar from his mouth and lowered his hand to just above belt level as he said cautiously, "I told my uncle I'd be waiting in Sunbonnet for an answer to my wire."

"You can wire again and tell him you was wrong," said the older of the pair. He shifted his weight thoughtfully as he added, "I see you have your right hand set for that cross-draw rig on your left hip, too. I don't reckon it'd be smart for you to let go of that cigar."

Just then, the door banged open and three men barged in, wearing tin stars on their vests.

While the gunslicks looked as innocent as possible, the leader of the lawmen called out, "Have to send me a wire, Sparks." He glanced around and asked, "Are you boys ahead of me? I'm sort of in a hurry to wire the sheriff up the line about a killing in the Silver Dollar. The rascal who done it lit out sudden, but we know where he's headed."

The two gunslicks exchanged glances. Then the leader said, "We was just leaving. You coming, Cantrell?"

"No, I just remembered I have a night letter to send. I'll wait till the sheriff, here, is finished with his more important business."

The older gunslick's eyes narrowed. Then he nodded and said, "Later."

They left. Or at least, they went outside. Longarm waited until the sheriff had sent his flier on the wanted man before he sidled up to him, took out his wallet, and said, "Sheriff, someone might be watching us through the window, so I'd like you to take a look at this without hollering or shooting off fireworks."

The sheriff looked down, kept his face blank, and murmured, "Federal man, huh? What's your play?"

Longarm said, "I'd like to be arrested."

"Do tell? What have you done?" the sheriff asked.

"Nothing. And I aim to keep it that way, here in Alliance. I'm on a mission for Uncle Sam that has nothing to do with you and yours. I don't want anyone in town to know I'm the law, but there might be a couple of guns waiting for me outside, and there'd be a lot less noise if you were to pretend to arrest me, carry me down to your lockup, and let me slip out the back door."

The sheriff nodded and said, "You must be the one they call Longarm. I've heard you were a cool and tricky cuss. Who's gunning for you, those two Rocking K guns from Sunbonnet?"

"You know them, Sheriff?"

"Just by rep. They've never gunned anyone in my county. They work for an old-fashioned cattle baron, over to the sand hills. The law over there is run sort of informal."

"We can talk about it as you take me to jail. Is there any way you can spread the word I've been arrested?"

"Sure. What do you figure we ought to charge you with?"

"How about murder? Those Rocking K guns have me down as one of their own kind, and talk about a possible hanging gets around the barrooms fast."

The older lawman nodded, turned to one of his deputies, and said, "You've been listening, Windy. Run over to the Paris Saloon and brag some at the bar. We just caught the meanest owlhoot ever seen in these parts."

Windy grinned at Longarm and asked, "What's your handle, Mr. Meanest Owlhoot?"

"Oh, let's call me the Frisco Kid. Don't say I'm him for sure. You might have to explain in the morning how you had to let me go for lack of evidence after holding me overnight."

As the deputy left, the sheriff shook his head and said, "I admire a man who thinks on his feet. I never stopped to think how it might look to the voters if I just let you get away. How do we get you from here to the jail, hands-up or cuffed?"

"You'd better frog-march me down the street with my hands up and free, in case my bluff don't work."

Longarm, the sheriff, and a pair of his deputies shared coffee and another smoke in the office of the town lockup as they gave the word of his "arrest" time to get around. He'd filled the local lawman in on his mission and the missing deputy, then questioned them about the strange doings over in the sandhills.

The sheriff couldn't tell him much he didn't already know. Sunbonnet was a couple of counties away, out of his jurisdiction. He'd heard little more than gossip, and took most of it with a grain of salt. He'd also heard about the religious commune squatting on federal range, but didn't know if its members were spiritualists, nudists, or communists.

Longarm mentioned the idea about Kate Bender and the sheriff said flatly, "I can tell you for certain the Terrible Benders ain't in Nebraska, naked or no. There's not a lawman born of mortal woman who wouldn't know Kate Bender on sight. Hell, I got a picture of her right here in my fool desk, somewhere."

As he started to rummage for it, Longarm said, "I got my own copy. She's as well-known as Miss Sarah Bernhardt, and a mite prettier."

"There you go, Longarm. Stick a pretty face like that on six feet of good figure, and tell me how she could walk past any man with eyes in his head or hair on his chest. If you ask me, the Benders is all dead. There's no place on earth such a noticeable bunch could still be hiding. Aside from being freakishly large, the Benders was stupid, and furrin. Nobody but the gal could ask directions in passable English. They had no kin on this side of the water, and they lit out across open prairie with the law right behind them. So where could they have gone?"

Longarm shrugged and said, "Don't know. I'd sure like to ask, if I ever meet up with them. It's my educated guess they pulled some trick nobody's thought of. Kate Bender claimed to have magic powers. She seems

to have been a sleight-of-hand artist. They might have pulled some carnival switch on the posse."

"You mean like switching the pea around in the old shell game?"

"That's about the size of it. They surely never went anywhere folks expected them to. I've been on a couple of cases where the crook drove me crazy for a time with some fool trick of misdirection. That's how they fool you, you know. They get you to watch one hand while they move things about with the other."

"Well, there was nothing very smart about the way they killed them folks down Kansas way."

"Oh, I don't know. They fooled ten men we know of with it. I mean, sure, it was obvious as hell, once once foks thought about it. But no fooling, Sheriff, how many times have you expected a nine-pound sledge to slam into you through a wall behind you?"

"Hmm, I see what you mean by misdirection. Sort of crude, though."

"It usually is. The carney switching the pea under the shell isn't a real wizard. The pea is not a pea, it's sponge rubber. Once you know you're not looking for a pea, it's easy as hell to see how he hides it all crunched up in the crook of a finger."

"I'll be switched! So that's how they do it! I'll keep that in mind the next time a tent show passes through. What you're saying is that Kate Bender used some such simple trick to hide herself and her trashy kin all these years. You figure *she* was made out of sponge rubber?"

"Nope, but she was purely the pea. Everybody remembers Kate, and she was the Bender everybody was watching all the time. We don't know for a fact that her father and brother were stupid immigrants. Anybody can act dumb and speak with an accent. The only one we have a picture of is Kate. The others would be hard to spot, cleaned up and talking sensible."

"I can see that," the sheriff agreeed. "But the gal was so tall and good-looking—"

"Suppose she rode out dressed as a man?"

"Come again? She was built like a brick shithouse!"

"Think about it. She was nearly six feet tall, and

big-boned. With her long hair tucked up inside a man's hat, wearing a bulky jacket, with her hips spread across a saddle . . ."

"Yeah, but her face was so well-known," the sheriff persisted.

"Well-known connected to a *female,* Sheriff. The mother was a big gal too. Suppose four *men* were spotted riding out of Cherryvale, maybe armed and looking for the Terrible Benders. How many men would have been combing the country at the time? A thousand?"

"By gum, I *like* it! Sure, four riders, one of 'em maybe a teen-aged boy and the other a smooth-shaven older man, all talking passable Kansas. It's the only way they could have done her, now that I study on it. But your deputy wired that he'd recognized Kate. Don't that mean she's back to wearing dresses again?"

"Can't say. Harcourt didn't mention the way she was dressed. I'm still trying to figure how he spotted her at all."

Windy came in to report that the whole town knew Longarm was in jail. Then he said, "Those two Rocking K riders are staked out in the livery across from the Great Electric Hotel."

Longarm swore softly and asked the sheriff, "What can you tell me about those jaspers, Sheriff?"

The older lawman shrugged and said, "Not much you don't know already. They must have been sent to watch the Widow Roundtree."

"All right, what can you tell me about her?"

"Not much. She thinks she's a cattle baron, too. I'm sure glad neither she nor old Colonel Claymore are in my county."

"You reckon they're ripe for a range war?"

"Hell, they've been having one ever since Victoria's man was killed by the Injuns. Colonel Claymore's a retired army man who came out here before the Sioux was tamed. He says he saw them Sand Hills first, and that he don't like to be crowded. He tried to buy the widow out, right after she got widowed. Miss Victoria can be stubborn too. When some riders tried to burn

her out a while back, they wound up dead. Neither she nor the colonel allowed they knew much about it, so the shooting was writ off as one of them things that just happen."

Longarm nodded, chewing absently at the edge of his mustache.

"So they'd both pay well for a man who could handle a gun as well as a throw-rope. How do you figure this new bunch, the church-of-whatever, fits in to their plans?"

"I don't see how either the colonel or Miss Victoria would want to join it. Right now they're too busy hating one another to pay much mind to spiritual matters. I'd say if those new settlers got in the way of either side, they could wind up meeting up with their ancestral spirits sooner than they might have planned. Their fool settlement is in the disputed range claimed by both the Diamond M and the Rocking K."

"I know, but it's really federal land."

The sheriff snorted and said, "I'd be careful how I said that to either Colonel Claymore or Miss Victoria, Longarm. They're both sort of old-fashioned about finders-keepers, and they've both got private armies."

Longarm shook his head and waved a hand in a gesture of dismissal. "Come on, we're edging up on the twentieth century. Those old, wild notions are out of date. Hell, the last time I was in Dodge, they had uniforms on the coppers and were talking about paving the streets."

"I know that and you know that, Longarm. But folks in the Sand Hills are still backward about the way they settle things."

"What's the law like in Sunbonnet?"

"Scared. There's no incorporated county government over there. They have a town constable who *might* arrest you if you did something awful and had no friends in the neighborhood. Last year the colonel caught a cow thief on his range with a running iron. Hung him from a telegraph pole without formalities. Nobody saw fit to make a fuss about it."

Longarm rose to his feet, saying, "In other words,

it's gun law, like Texas in the seventies, and these squatters I've been ordered to evict are camped smack-dab in the middle of the battleground."

"Yep. You'll be doing them a favor to run them out before one of them scares a calf that either side is fond of. Where are you heading now?"

"Sunbonnet. I'm going to need a horse. I generally get one from the army remount folks, but there's no fort around here, and—"

"Say no more, son. You just give me a receipt for any mounts you need from my remuda, and if you don't come back alive with it from the sandhills, I'll charge Uncle Sam."

Longarm took a standard form from his inside pocket and made it out to the county instead of the army. As long as he had the chance, he signed for three. The sheriff said the remuda was out back and he could pick the horses up whenever he needed them.

Longarm thanked the cooperative lawman and let himself out the back door of the jailhouse. He found himself in an alley running beside the main drag and on the same side as Victoria Roundtree's hotel. He smiled. Things were set up right, for a change.

He moseyed down the alley, walking slowly, gun in hand, as he tried to figure the play of the gunslicks staked out on the far side of Main Street. They couldn't be aiming to gun Victoria Roundtree as she came out of the hotel. Not with a local sheriff who knew his business and a good sixty-mile dash over open country before they could reach the safety of their employer's barony.

He got behind the hotel. He could see a light in the window of the room the widow had checked into. The shade was drawn. A one-story shop with a flat roof squatted under Victoria's window. He rolled a trash barrel over by a drainpipe, holstered his sixgun, and hauled himself as quietly as he could manage to the tarpaper roof.

He eased over to the window and listened. There were no sounds from the other side of the shade, but the window sash was up a few inches and the shade

wasn't drawn below the sill. He hunkered down and took a peep through the narrow slit.

Victoria Roundtree hadn't bleached her hair. She was blonde all over. The widow was seated nude on her bed, cutting her toenails. A washtub filled with soapy water sat on the floor before her. She'd just had a sponge bath and was drying off in the altogether. Her Colt Dragoon lay on the covers by her right hip, so Longarm didn't think it would be a good idea to startle her by tapping on the window.

He knew she was waiting for him, and was probably worried. So, even though it seemed rude, he put a hand under the sash, opened the window, and climbed in, saying, "It's me, don't shoot."

He'd expected her to fluster and try to cover up, but she didn't. She just sat there, one knee drawn up in front of her naked breasts as she held the clippers to her toenails with her hand and stared at him, more puzzled than embarrassed.

He said, "There's two gunslicks watching the front door."

"I know," she replied calmly. "I spotted them a while back. What's our best play?"

He finished climbing in, took a seat on a bentwood chair near the dresser, and said, "You'd better slip something on. I'm only human."

She rose from the bed, free and unashamed of her body as she moved over to pick up a silk shift. "We'll get to that part later," she said. "Those Rocking K hands have us boxed off from my buckboard in the livery across the way."

"You know them, ma'am?"

"Of course. A man named Claymore sent them here to scare me."

"You don't look scared, ma'am." Longarm grinned. It was easy to see, once a man got over the first shock, why Victoria was unashamed to be seen naked. She had a body no woman needed to feel ashamed of. You could have whitewashed her and put her in a museum as a Greek goddess. It was sort of obvious that she knew it.

She slipped on the silk shift, which didn't hide enough to matter, as she replied, "I was scared a while back, when I heard they'd put you in jail. How'd you get out, and how come they called you the Frisco Kid? That's not the name you gave me on the train."

"I use a lot of names, ma'am. As to why I'm out, it was all a misunderstanding."

She nodded and said, "In other words, you paid them off, or you ain't this Frisco Kid?"

"A little of both, maybe. I sort of made a deal with the sheriff, and as to the Frisco Kid, I never heard of the jasper until tonight."

"I don't suppose you feel like telling me who you really are?"

"No, ma'am, I don't. But, like the old saying goes, what's in a name? A rose by any name would smell as sweet, right?"

She laughed incredulously and asked, "Are you suggesting I call you *Rose,* for God's sake?"

"You can call me Spot or Rover, if you have to put a handle on everything and everybody."

She raised an eyebrow and asked, "Why are you teasing me?"

He said, "You started it. You must be from back East. Folks out here usually take the hint when strangers are sort of casual as to who they might be or what they might be called."

"If you must know, I was born in Penn State. But I've been out here six or seven years, and I've never met anyone, East or West, who couldn't at least *make up* one name and stick to it!"

He stood up, stepped over to the oil lamp on the dresser, and put it out as he said, "You make up some name you feel comfortable with and I'll answer to it, for now."

As the room plunged into darkness, she edged away and asked, "Have you gone crazy?"

He said, "Nope. This corner room has two windows, and that other one must overlook the livery across the street. I never raise a shade with a light behind me, if I can help it."

"Oh, I thought—"

"I know what you thought. Stay to one side of the window as I raise this shade. Some green guns take shots at any movement for the hell of it."

Keeping his own body to one side, Longarm slowly eased the shade up, allowing lamplight and the view of Main Street to drive the darkness of the room away. The open doorway of the livery across the way was a featureless black square. A couple of townies passed by, reeling a bit from a night of serious drinking. Somewhere in the night, a piano was tinkling a bittersweet tune, but the hour was late and they were fixing to roll up the boardwalks in a little while.

Victoria asked, "See anything?"

He was just about to say no, when a match flared inside the livery and he muttered, "One of them just lit a smoke, for God's sake. I figured they were new at the game. One was all cheap flash, and the older one's likely an old army man who's gone into business for himself. He knows how to use a gun, but he talks too much about it for a man who's used to killing white men. Do you have names you can hang on them, Miss Victoria?"

She eased over to join him at the window, and he was uncomfortably aware of her perfumed hair and the tantalizing odor of her freshly laundered female parts as she answered, "The younger one is called Pronto. I don't know the other one's nickname, but I know they ride for the Rocking K. Do you think you can take them?"

He shrugged and said, "That ain't the problem I'm pondering. You say your buckboard is over there in the livery. Is there anything of real value in it?"

"Well, the wagon itself is worth something. I wasn't dumb enough to leave anything in it when I left it there to catch the train down to Denver. I sent my team back with the hands who escorted me in from my spread. It's just a regular old buckboard. Why do you ask?"

"I can get you home without the fool buckboard, if you ain't afraid of a few days in the saddle. You could

have somebody fetch the buckboard in a day or so, after we get you forted up in your own place and I've had time to study up on just what in thunder those jaspers over there are trying to prove."

"Isn't it obvious? I made the mistake of coming back alone and the colonel sent those hired guns to keep me from reaching my ranch alive!"

He shook his head and said, "Not hardly. Nobody guns a woman in a town they don't own. Those boys would never reach the jailhouse alive if they harmed a hair on your pretty head. Your Colonel Claymore knows this, if he's an old hand at rough justice. If he wanted you dead, he'd have someone laying for you with a rifle, out in the Sand Hills."

She stood beside him in silent thought for a time before she nodded and said, "That makes sense. It's obvious that they're trying to frighten me, though. You don't suppose the colonel is dumb enough to think he can keep me pinned down here forever, do you?"

"Nope. We're a good month away from the fall roundup, too. So he can't be aiming to mess up your plans to market your beef at a profit. Even if you don't march over to the Western Union office and wire for help, your hands would miss you in a day or so and ride in to fetch you, so . . . Hell, that's it!"

"I beg your pardon?"

Longarm jerked a thumb toward the dark square of the livery stable doorway.

"Those gunslicks are pawns your colonel figures to give away in a nasty chess game. He probably ordered them to pin you down, here in Alliance. The move he's hoping you'll make is to yell for help. You're supposed to wire home, telling your boys a maiden is in distress. Do I have to draw you a picture, or can you figure the rest yourself?"

She swore softly under her breath and said, "The bastard is fixing to raid my ranch while the boys ride over here to save me. That has to be it! My foreman, Spike, would come hell-for-leather with my best fighting men, leaving just a few hands to guard my herd and outfit. I *knew* that old bastard would start thinking

mean the minute I left home on a business trip! I did order Spike and the boys to keep a sharp watch while I was away, but as I told you, neither my segundo nor anyone else I have working for me really knows his way around a range war."

Longarm took out his Ingersoll pocket watch and studied the dial by the dim light from outside. He said, "It's after midnight and the telegraph office is closed. They're watching this window, so they likely think you're tuckered from your train ride and aim to spend the night here. They'll take turns on watch, aiming to scare you some more, come morning."

"Then it should be simple for you to sneak over there and get the drop on them, right?"

"Wrong. The way you win at chess is to make some moves the other side ain't expecting. The colonel wants us to have an exciting stay here in Alliance. He doesn't care what happens to those two saddle tramps. He just wants you stuck here, needing help."

"I agree. But if you just took those two pawns and we rode out for my spread . . ."

"Back up and restudy what you're saying, ma'am. This town ain't Dodge ten years ago. They got a tough sheriff and some rules and regulations about gunplay. If either of us smoked up those jaspers over there, we'd have to wait for a hearing before the county coroner. We'd be stuck at least over the weekend, and your hands would hear of it and come riding in, just in case the local law should act unreasonable about self-defense."

"Then what *can* we do?"

"Get you home, safe, silent, and quick. I told you I know where we can pick up some horses. Let's see if we can figure out how to keep those rascals convinced you're up here in this room as long as possible."

She laughed and said, "Oh, yes, I like it! We'll sneak out and ride, leaving them to watch all night. We'll be well on our way before the colonel knows I'm coming with a professional!"

Longarm didn't answer. He didn't like to lie, and he wasn't sure how she'd take the rest of his plan. He

ran it through his mind a couple of times, examining it for holes, before he said, "I can give us even more time, if you don't mind looking a mite naughty to the folks in this hotel, ma'am."

"What do you mean? I don't give a damn about the people in this rat trap."

He saw that her gun was still over on the bed, so he risked a slap in the face at most as he told her what he aimed to do, with her permission.

She laughed and said, "You really are outrageous!"

"I know. Folks keep telling me. Shall we try it?"

She agreed, and he went to the door and let himself out. He tiptoed along the hall and down the steps to the lobby. The room clerk had gone into his cubbyhole to sleep, but the pimple-faced bellhop dozed in a chair under a potted palm. Longarm walked over and nudged his foot with the toe of a boot.

The youth awoke with a start, and glanced at the street entrance, so Longarm knew the kid thought he'd come in that way. The bellhop grinned up at him and said, "I figured you might be back. She's in room 207."

Longarm flipped a silver dollar in his lap and said, "I don't want to cheat you folks on a single room, but I don't like to register my right name, if you follow my drift."

"Married man, huh? Why register at all? The clerk's drunk in the back, and I can take care of your, ah, luggage."

Longarm took out some more coins and said, "I figured you for a bright lad. Listen, I'd sort of like to be private up there, come morning. Could you fix that up for me?"

The bellhop scooped up the extra tip and said, "I'll make sure the chambermaid won't get around to that end of the hall before noon." He eyed Longarm thoughtfully before he added, with a sly grin, "Make it worth my while and you can shack up until three." Longarm dropped another dollar in his lap and said, "I'm counting on that. My wife is out of town, but she has friends. You know how women are. I don't want a soul to know the lady upstairs is having com-

pany. Should anyone ask for her, tell them she's train-sick or out buying a hat or—hell, you've played this game before."

The bellhop nodded with a lewd grin and Longarm left him there, feeling pleased with himself. He knew the boy would cut the other help in and the whole bunch would conspire to give the appearance that Victoria was up in that room alone, at least until late afternoon.

He went back upstairs and let himself back in. He told her what he'd arranged and she said, "I'd ask you how you knew so much about such things, if I thought I'd get a straight answer. I'd better get dressed if we're about to sneak out over that roof, don't you think?"

He noticed the hesitancy in her question. Hell, if she'd really wanted to get dressed, she'd have done it by now. He took her in his arms and kissed her. She started to struggle just a bit, but quickly went limp in his arms, and responded warmly.

As they came up for air, she giggled and murmured, "That mustache tickles."

He said, "Mexican gals say a kiss without a mustache is like an egg without salt."

Then he picked her up, carried her over to the bed, and lowered her to the covers as she gasped, "What do you think you're doing?"

He kissed her some more before he answered, "We want to give those rascals across the way time to bed down for the night. In the morning, they'll wire Colonel Claymore that you're still here, likely sleeping."

"That may well be, but I make it a policy not to sleep with men who work for me, damn it."

"That's all right, ma'am. I never said I wanted to work for you."

By this time, he had his free hand between her thighs. As it slid upward, she stiffened, thrust her groin up to meet his cupped palm, and protested, "I don't even know your name! What kind of girl do you think I am?"

"A right pretty one," he answered with a smile.

He kissed her some more to shut her up as he tried

to figure out how he was going to get out of his duds without giving up any advantages. He could see she was one of those tedious gals who thought she ought to put up a little fight.

She spoke with her moist lips against his as she murmured, "My, you *do* have a professional hand. Aren't you going to take your clothes off?"

He replied, "No sooner said than done," as he rolled off the bed and started shucking himself like a corncob. He noticed, as he tossed his boots away and rolled back, that she'd gotten rid of her silk shift.

When she observed, "My, you undress faster than any man I've ever known," he answered, "You had a head start on me."

They were both laughing as he entered her. Then she gasped and pleaded, "Take it easy! I haven't done this for a while!"

"Me neither," he lied, easing off a bit to let her get used to it. She drew her knees up and wedged them against his ribs to control the depth of his thrusts.

He saw that she was more relaxed and willing now, so he speeded up a little. She dug her nails into his back and threw caution to the winds as she spread her knees wide and sobbed, "Oh, God, I've died and gone to Heaven!"

He paced himself to let her climax first. Then he let himself go as she throbbed in satisfaction and breathed sweet words in his ear.

For a moment they lay limply together, then she laughed and said, "When I said Colonel Claymore didn't know I'd be coming with a gunslick, I meant it another way. That was lovely. Can we do it again?"

He rolled gently off, but fondled her breast as he shook his head and sighed, "Later. We'll be alone on the trail at least two nights. Right now, we'd best see about getting a good start on those rascals across the way."

She said, "Oh, dear, I can see we'll have to worry about sand and cockleburrs between here and Sunbonnet." Then she sat up, bent over for the washrag on the edge of the washtub, and wiped herself clean.

Longarm did the same as she went to the luggage piled in one corner atop his saddle and roll.

She opened a valise and said, "If I'm riding astride, I'd better wear my jeans. Unless you have a sidesaddle for me, too?"

He said, "I could ask for one, but I just had a better idea. If you're in pants and keep your mouth shut when we pick up two mounts and a pack critter, the wrangler won't remember me riding off with a lady. It'll be dark in the corral. We want as many folks as possible to think you're still here in town, as long as possible."

They both got dressed. In the gloom, he could see that her boyish figure, clad in jeans, might pass for a male rider's. Her riding hat was sort of fussy and had a veil. He told her to put it away with her other female notions. As he gathered up their considerable gear, she picked her gun up from the rug, where it had fallen in all the excitement of the minutes just past, and tucked it in her waistband. He helped her out the side window to the flat roof. Then he dropped to the alley and caught the things as she tossed them down to him.

With Victoria packing some of the stuff, they tried to stay in the shadows as they walked down the alley to the jailhouse. He asked her to wait by the corral gate as he stepped to the back door and knocked softly.

A sleepy deputy opened it, recognized Longarm, and asked, "You want them critters the sheriff said you could borrow, Marshal?"

He said, "Yep, but don't call me that. That kid over yonder don't know I'm the law. Just cut out two saddle broncs and a critter I can load some possibles on, and we'll be on our way, sort of private."

The lawman glanced at the dark outline of Victoria in the middle distance and, being a professional, didn't ask questions. Since his earlier visit, the boys in the jailhouse had been spinning yarns about the legendary Longarm, and the deputy knew the tall lawman's working habits were sort of strange; in fact, it seemed he didn't *have* any such habits. The young deputy reflected that, if all the stories he'd just heard were true, Longarm could only be expected to do the unexpected, and

this went some way toward explaining why he was still in one piece.

While Victoria waited in the alley, Longarm and the deputy cut three sleepy horses from the remuda in the sheriff's corral. The deputy wrangled up a pack tree and some rope harness as he asked Longarm, "Is it true you really shot a killer out in Frisco directly in the rectum?"

Longarm said, "Wrecked him, hell. I *killed* the son of a bitch."

The deputy started to rephrase it, but saw that Longarm was joshing, and chuckled.

Longarm said, "It was a nasty way to go, but I ain't sorry. The rascal had killed some friends of mine."

"They said you tended to get testy about such matters. Who's the kid you're riding out with, another fed?"

"That's close enough. If I wanted you boys to know him, I'd have brought him inside and introduced him."

The deputy nodded smugly, and said, "I get it. We use informers too. Some cowboy's agreed to point someone out to you, right?"

"Why don't you just go inside and have some more coffee? I'll take over from here on. Tell your boss I'm obliged for the loan. If I don't bring them back, tell him the accounting office won't make too big a fuss if he says they were each worth ten dollars more than he paid for them."

The deputy left and went inside as Longarm saddled and bridled. He whistled softly, and Victoria moved closer to open the gate as he led the three horses out.

He patted the skirts of his government issue saddle and said, "You ride this one. I'll load our stuff on the pack critter and fork this pinto bareback."

"Are you sure you're up to a sixty-mile ride, bareback?"

"No, but my folks brought me up to be polite to ladies. Besides, that fellow I just talked to thinks you're a cowboy, and most cowboys own their own saddles.

Victoria insisted on helping him load her luggage

before she took the pack horse's rope lead and swung herself gracefully up into his McClellan.

She waited until he'd forked the barebacked pinto and was leading out before she said, "There's something odd about all this. Why do you ride an army saddle, and how come the sheriff here is so friendly, after he arrested you earlier this evening?"

He said, "I told you I had to send some wires. One of my answers was a money order."

"Aha! You *did* bribe them, didn't you?"

"Well, let's say I got the sheriff to rent me some critters, ma'am. We both know it'd be against the law if he just took money as a gift."

Satisfied, she said, "I knew it. I've never met a lawman who wasn't as crooked as Jesse James, under that highfalutin badge."

"Don't you like lawmen, Miss Victoria?"

"I hate every mother's son of them. Bunch of damned troublemakers who poke their noses where nobody needs them to." Then she added, "Forget the rascals. We make our own law in the sandhills, and you don't have to call me Miss Victoria, considering. You can call me Vickie, and I'll just call you Stud, till I find out who you really are."

He nodded and they rode down the alley to the end of town, then headed off across the prairie in the moonlight.

He wondered what she'd call him when he got around to telling her who he really was. He doubted like hell that she'd call him some of the nice things she'd called him up in her room back there.

Victoria Roundtree thought she was coming home to Sunbonnet with a domesticated killer as a sidekick. He'd pointed out a couple of times that he wasn't on her payroll, only headed the same way, but he doubted whether she believed that. She was a stubborn lady who was used to having her own way. Longarm was modest enough to know their roll in the feathers had been more than simple pleasure to her. He'd met damned few women in his time who didn't figure a man who'd been inside them didn't owe them more than

candy, books, or flowers. Oh, she'd liked it, all right. But she'd worked too hard to get him there for him to think it was just his mustache she cottoned to. She was aiming to use him against her personal enemies in a feud that was none of his business. Her range disputes involved only her outfit, Colonel Claymore's, and the government of Nebraska. Range wars were not a federal matter, and he knew Billy Vail would expect him not to take sides.

So, sooner or later, he was going to have to tell the pretty gal that he didn't aim to back her play, and if he knew women, she was going to cloud up and rain all over him.

But meanwhile, they were riding off to the middle of nowhere, it was a nice moonlit night, and the grass would be dry all the way to Sunbonnet. So what the hell.

Chapter 3

Nebraska seemed to be a stretch of country that just couldn't make up its mind. Left to itself, it would have been a northern extension of the high plains to the south. It had all been seabottom, once upon a time. It sloped gently from the rolling high plains of the West to the low prairies near the Missouri. It should have been flat as a plank, and a lot of Nebraska was. But after it had been an ocean for a while, the country had decided to be a desert, and for a million years or so, a third of the country north of the Platte had been covered with drifting sand dunes, like the Sahara. The dunes had crept across the flat, rich seabottom clay, filling in dry washes or riding over earlier hills as if the sand just owned it all. Then, long before any Indian could remember, the weather had shifted and the summer rains and winter snows had greened the sand dunes with a carpet of grass. So the desert had vanished.

Yet most of it was still there, just below the grassroots. Every once in a while, a prairie fire stripped the sod from a few square miles, and a whole range of the Sand Hills could shift to other parts in a few days. A railroad cut or a careless plough could make what looked like a solid rise decide to wander, too. It made mapmaking a bitch. The army survey maps showed hills where no hills still grew, and sometimes a valley on the map could turn out to be a three-hundred-foot rise. The existence of a water hole depended on when the last survey team had been through.

The official boundaries of the Sand Hill country were hazy, too. A lot depended on what the mapmaker's boss wanted to sell. The railroaders tended to flatten

out the Sand Hills and make them sort of fertile. They had a lot of railroad-grant lands to sell off, and published glowing reports of the Garden of Eden west of the Big Muddy. The local chambers of commerce in the northern part of Nebraska tended to fudge a bit about just where the Sand Hills really started. Each county allowed that there was some rough country farther north, east, south, or west, but they all insisted that the *real* Sand Hills were somewhere else.

The Indian Agency maps made out the Sand Hills to be worse than they were, because the agency hoped to carve out a few more sections as reservation land. For the same reason, folks interested in open range saw sand hills on rich bottomland, and homesteaders could see rich wheat land on the side of a steep ridge about to start shifting. So each traveler had to take the Sand Hill country as he found it, and make up his own mind.

Longarm had noticed that the prairie was rolling as they rode out of Alliance by moonlight. As the sun rose to find them still trending northeast, he decided that if they weren't already in the Sand Hills, he needed glasses. But Victoria said the swells of tawny prairie they were crossing were nothing to the real thing, around Sunbonnet. He wondered, as they rode along, why folks who lived out here took so much pleasure in bragging about how awful it could get. He'd never seen a cow town or canyon that some oldtimer couldn't put down as sissy next to a wilder town or a deeper canyon somewhere over the horizon.

They rode until it started to get hot. Then he called a halt in a low draw, where a grove of cottonwoods told him there was water a few feet down.

They tethered the horses to the trees, and as Victoria built a fire with windfall, Longarm took a folding prospecting spade from his saddlebag, and started to dig.

The bed of the draw was carpeted with sedge and the rank, wiry stems of what the Indians called "greasy grass." It offered rich fodder for the horses over in the shade of the cottonwoods, but it was a bitch to dig

through. Like all native grasses west of the Missouri, it was mostly roots. He had to bust through sod more than six inches thick before the blade of his spade started grating into anything that felt like soil, and even below the dry surface sod, the earth was laced with whipcord rootlets that fought back.

The first few spadefuls of real dirt made him think Victoria might be right, and that they hadn't reached the real Sand Hills country yet. The rotting of prairie vegetation left alone a century or more had stained the soil the color of black loam. But, like fool's gold, the color was a prank of nature. A few more scoops brought up pure quartz sand that would have been at home on any beach. It was bone-dry, and spilled in from the sides of the hole almost as fast as he could dig. But he knew the cottonwoods were thirsty trees, and they were greened up. So he widened the hole and kept at it until he stood waist-deep in a wide pit and started hitting damp sand. He dug another foot and scrambled out to let the depression fill with seep.

He walked over to the little fire, followed the smoke plume up with a thoughtful eye, then said, "You'd better put that out as soon as the coffee's ready. I'll be up on the ridge if you need me."

He went to the horses, took the Winchester from its saddle boot, and climbed the slope. He crouched low against the skyline for a look-see all around. He could see for miles up here, and it seemed they had the rolling prairie all to themselves.

George Armstrong Custer had probably thought the same thing when he led his troops over another ridge into another valley where the greasy grass grew. Appearances were deceptive on the high plains. Folks who aimed to sneak across the sea of grass rode along the troughs between the swells.

Longarm lay prone in the dry, dead grass atop the sandhill, with the Winchester cradled in one arm as he fished out a cheroot and a kitchen match with his free hand. He thumbnailed a light and settled down with his hatbrim pulled low and the warm sun baking him dry. There was a soft breeze playing across the ridge

from the west, so the grass stems rippled, but there wasn't anything very interesting going on as far as he could see. A big gray locust landed on his sleeve and sat there chewing tobacco as it seemed to stare up at him with its little goggle eyes.

Longarm said, "Howdy. Hot enough for you today?" and the insect left with a rattlesnake buzz of its butterfly-pretty wings.

Victoria joined him with a tin cup of coffee and some beans on a tin plate. She flopped down beside him and asked if he had seen anything. He said he'd have told her if he had, and thanked her for putting out the fire.

He set the gun aside in the grass, and started working on the light meal, saying, "You'd best go back to the shade down there and try for some shut-eye. We'll be riding far when the sun goes down, and it's the second night in the saddle that gets you."

She said, "I've ridden some. What about you?"

"I'll wake you up a couple of hours before sundown and catch a few winks while you keep watch up here. I can get by on two hours a day for a while, if I have to."

"I noticed you're in good shape. I'm not the least bit sleepy. I'd rather make love, as long as we're stuck here for the afternoon."

He took a sip of coffee before he answered, "So would I. But our trick might not have worked, and I'd sure feel silly if those gunslicks rode over this ridge while we were just starting to enjoy ourselves. The Sioux are supposed to be restless this summer, too. One of us has to keep an eye peeled up here."

As she waited for him to drain the cup and clean the plate, Victoria shuddered despite the heat and said, "God, I hate Indians, don't you?"

He shook his head and said, "Not really. Indians are just folks, like the rest of us. Some are dumb and some are ornery, but most are just trying to get by as best they know how. I've met some I liked and some I had to shoot. White folks come both ways, too."

"The damned Sioux killed my husband and I'll

never forgive them, no matter what. I could understand them killing him. I could even understand them lifting his scalp, even if it was an ugly thing to do. But they even cut his fingers off and—"

"Back up," he cut in. "You say the Indians who caught your man out on the range sliced up his *hands*? You've been blaming the wrong tribe, Vickie. He wasn't killed by Sioux. They must have been Cheyenne."

"What are you talking about? You weren't there, and everybody knows the Sioux were on the warpath that summer."

"Sure they were. So were the Arapahoe and Cheyenne. The Cheyenne are called the Finger Cutters by the other tribes. They don't do it to be ornery; it's a religious notion of the Cheyenne. They slice up a dead enemy's hands so he can't draw a bowstring or fire a rifle if he comes back at them as a ghost."

She grimaced and said, "I don't care what tribe my husband's killers rode for. What they did to him was disgusting, and the only good Indian is a dead Indian."

He chewed and swallowed the last of the beans and said, "A lot of white folks have said much the same, but I'd like to tell you a tale. It happened in Colorado, back in the sixties. A settler and his boy were killed by Indians south of Denver. The Colorado Militia lit out, mad as hell, and rode into a camp of Southern Cheyenne in a draw called Sand Creek."

"I hope they killed every one of the red bastards!"

"They sure tried. Most of the braves were out hunting, but the militia shot up a mess of women and children. They butchered and scalped. The colonel in command made himself a tobacco pouch from a dead Cheyenne's scrotum. It took them a week or so to find out they'd wiped out the wrong Indians. The band camped at Sand Creek were friendlies. Or let's say they *had* been friendlies, up till then."

She shrugged and said, "That's tough, but *some* Indians had to pay for that settler and his son, didn't they?"

"Revenge is a tricky business, Vickie. In the end,

some men of the Seventh Cav died for that Colorado settler and his boy. I told you most of the braves were out hunting when the militia hit their camp. They came home to find their chief, their women, and their kids dead or dying. One squaw was still alive with eight bullets in her and a tale of rape to tell. Maybe that's why, a few years later, the Southern Cheyenne were riding with the Sioux at the Little Big Horn. The Finger Cutters weren't Dakota. They spoke a different lingo and had different customs, up to the time of Sand Creek and another misunderstanding at Washita. That 'dead Indian is a good Indian' policy sure made the Cheyenne see the light, though. It converted them into some of the meanest fighters of the Dakota Confederacy. If your man was jumped by Cheyenne—and it sure looks like he was—you can thank some Colorado militiamen who didn't study much on Indians before they smoked them up."

Victoria took the tin plate he'd finished, wiped it with a bunch of grass, and set it aside as she said, "Well, what's done is done. I don't have a husband now, and it's boring as hell just laying up here on this ridge."

He nodded and said, "I know. Boring is part of the job of staying alive. One of us has to keep watch up here, just the same."

She unbuckled the fly of her tight jeans as she lay on her side next to him and slyly suggested. "Can't you watch the horizon just as well from on top of me?"

He said, "We'll get sunburned. It's a hot, cloudless day and, for God's sake, we're in full view of anyone within three miles!"

She started peeling off her jeans as she insisted, "We can leave most of our duds on. It might be sort of a novelty to do it like sneaky kids on the village green."

He started to protest. Then he saw she had her jeans off and was half on her back in her hickory shirt and trim high-button boots. It was sort of stimulating, the way her half-raised knees played peek-a-boo with the golden triangle betwen her creamy thighs in the bright sunlight.

He put his hat in the grass, peeled off his frock coat, and wadded it into a pillow to put under her head as she lay back, begging, "Oh, hurry!"

He unbuttoned his vest and shirt, but left them on, shifting his watch from his left-hand vest pocket to the one on the right that held, clipped to the other end of his gold-washed watch chain, his .44 derringer. He slipped off his gunbelt and unbuttoned his own pants and the longjohns he wore under them.

She reached into his open fly as he awkwardly shoved the pants down around his knees, and her eyes laughed up at him in the sunlight as she murmured, "Oh, I see great minds run in the same channels. My God, you'll never get that monster inside me!"

He said, "It was your idea," as, with his pants around his knees, he somehow managed to get into position over her. She was still protesting that he was too big for her as she opened her body to his and he wondered, with the objective part of his mind, why women thought they had to talk so foolishly every time they did it. She unbuttoned her own shirt and thrust her naked breasts up to meet his bare chest as she prattled on about the way he was splitting her wide open. He rested his weight on his elbows, reached out for the Winchester, and pulled it close to him as he started moving in time with her undulations. The contrast between cloth-covered and naked flesh was piquant. She was good—damned good—but her maidenly protests about his hurting her were getting sort of tedious. She was probably self-conscious about her size, he decided. Victoria was taller than most women, albeit a head shorter than him. She was maybe thirty, and hadn't been a virgin for a long time. She was tight enough, and she moved right, but she was probably afraid he found her hips wider than some he'd known, and her cute little remarks about how big he was were designed to keep him from comparing her to someone like that little gal he'd had the other night in Denver. He did compare them, of course, and it was stimulating as hell. Variety was what made the whole game so interesting. If all women were built just the same, it

would be sort of tedious, even if they were all beautiful and built to fit just perfect.

He didn't think she wanted to hear about the gal in Denver, though, so he said, "Christ, you're tight as a drum. I hope I'm not hurting you."

Victoria Roundtree went wild.

They climaxed, cuddled, and sweet-talked, then started again. But Longarm suddenly stopped and said, "Don't move. I just spotted something over to the southeast."

She writhed her buttocks in the grass and protested, "For God's sake, have you been watching the horizon all this time?"

He said, "Just between kisses. We'd better ease down the slope and haul our duds on. Two little dots just topped a rise over yonder, and now they're down in a draw. Looked like two white riders, coming from Alliance and riding a mite fast."

"How far away are they?"

"Couple of miles, maybe. Hard to tell, the way the air shimmers over these Sand Hills."

"Then we've got time to come again. Hurry. I'm almost there."

He started to protest, but she was moving nicely and he hadn't been all that far behind her. So, though he knew it was insane, he started moving inside her again, letting himself go to make it a quick one, as one part of his mind kept telling him he was an idiot while it watched the skyline to the southeast.

Victoria's lush curves were well-padded, and the hard ground under her bouncing bottom didn't seem to bother her. Their bodies met in jarring thumps as he pounded in and out of her. She was gushing with desire, and he felt his own heart pounding against her perspiring breasts as his impending climax started creeping up the muscles of his tense thighs.

Just then, two riders topped the next ridge at a lope and he gasped, "Jesus, here they come!"

She was still moving under him as he snatched up the Winchester, spotted the flash of sunlight on the

silver conchos of one rider's hat, and said, "Hold still, damn it! It's those two hired guns!"

She gasped, "I can't stop! I'm coming!"

So he swore, took aim from his insecure vantage point, and opened fire!

Victoria screamed, for the action of the Winchester was right over her head as he levered and fired, aiming at the horses. The butt slammed against his shoulder and Victoria's pubic bone was slamming him at the other end, but he'd fought mounted before, and managed to drop both ponies with three shots. As the riders tumbled into the dusty grass on the far ridge, Longarm put a few rounds close enough to send them crawfishing down the far side, and then, his ears still ringing from the gunfire and his nostrils filled with gunsmoke, he gritted his teeth, sighed, "Jesus!" and came.

For a moment he couldn't move, as he sprawled limply atop her, his Winchester still in his hand. Then he said, "We've got to move out. I put them on foot, but they must have our gunsmoke sighted, and this foolishness has got to stop!"

As he rolled off, she started to sit up, saying, "Oh, my God, I'll never be the same!"

He shoved her flat with his free hand and hissed, "*Roll* down the rear slope, damn it! I keep telling you, there's a couple of armed and likely perturbed gunslicks just over the next ridge! I'll cover you while you get dressed and run for our mounts."

She eased down the slope, dragging her discarded hat and jeans until it was safe for her to sit up and giggle, "You look funny, laying there bare-assed with a Winchester, honey."

He didn't answer. He knew it was the simple truth.

Victoria pulled on her jeans and started for the horses under the cottonwoods as she buttoned up. Longarm grabbed his own clothes and put himself more or less together, then, after a last, hard look at the now empty skyline, he ran down to join her under the trees.

As he unhitched the horses and started leading them over to the pool in the sand, she asked, "What are you doing? I thought we had to ride."

He said, "We do. We'll ride farther if the brutes are well watered. Even if those boys decide on a frontal attack, they have a quarter-mile to cross, which gives us a minute or so. Here, you water while I keep an eye aimed upslope."

She took the leads and stood by as the horses gingerly negotiated the treacherous slope down to the cool puddle, but as they drank, she said, "You should have aimed at them instead of their poor critters."

He said, "I was firing long-range from an unsteady position. A horse is a lot bigger target."

She giggled and said, "It *was* exciting, wasn't it? I couldn't tell if I was coming or going when that gun went off in my face just as I was peaking. Have you got any other tricks like that up your sleeve?"

He grinned and said, "I can't say I recollect getting off with both guns at once, before. Tonight, I'll see if I can work out some novelties a mite less noisy."

She laughed. "I'm ready right now."

He said, "I figured as much. But right now, it's time to move on. Those old boys have had time to get their wind back and study their next move. I misdoubt like hell they'll be coming friendly."

He boosted her up in his saddle, forked the pinto, and led out, following the draw and avoiding the skyline beyond for the moment. As they rode, she asked, "Don't you think you could take them, Stud? If you could hit anything at that range, under such—well, unusual conditions—"

He said, "I don't know if I could take them. I know I don't have to. I've stranded them on foot in the middle of nowhere. If we don't give them a crack at these horses, they'll have no choice but to walk back the way they came. I'm sort of glad they came out here so convenient, as a matter of fact. It's going to take them the rest of today and part of tonight to find anything they can chase us with. By the time they get back to civilization and remount, we'll have such a lead on them that it won't be worth their while even to try. If they have any sense at all, we've seen the last of them. It's

clear sailing for us to Sunbonnet, now. Did you wire you were coming?"

"No, I never got the chance. Some maniac I met on the train dragged me off across a rooftop and started screwing me silly!"

"There you go. We've thrown off pursuit, and an ambush don't seem likely. Just sit back and enjoy the scenery, such as it is."

"I still don't see why you don't gun them. Nobody would make a fuss about it, out here. They'd never be found, and—"

"I know how to kill folks, Vickie. I just don't see the need to kill when I don't have to."

"You sure talk funny for a hired gun, Stud."

"Wait till you get to know me better, honey. You'll laugh like hell . . . I hope."

By the time they reached Sunbonnet, a few days later, the two of them had gotten to know one another well indeed. Or at least, Longarm knew Victoria Roundtree. If there was any part of her he hadn't explored, it couldn't be important. She'd told him the story of her life at least a dozen times. He'd listened, urging her on to supply details she might have missed, not because it was terribly interesting, but to avoid having to make up new lies and evasions about his own background.

The Sand Hills rose to more impressive heights as they traveled deeper into them. In some ways, the country reminded him of the foothills of the Rockies, west of Denver. In other ways, it had a mind of its own.

There were no rimrocks or dry washes, no traces of running water. The tawny folds of the Sand Hill country rippled as smooth as the muscles under a cougar's hide. The draws were filled in places with brush or fair-sized trees, but there were no streambeds or ponds of standing water anywhere. Any rain that fell soaked right in to sink out of sight beneath the sod. The fertile look of the rolling prairie was an illusion.

As they drew near Sunbonnet, Longarm started seeing sunflower windmills and big tanks of galvanized

iron that were set like washtubs in the sand. A few calico longhorns loafed around each untended man-made water hole. Where they'd grazed and trampled the sod away near the tanks, the winds had scooped deep blowouts in the prairie. The idea of anyone trying to *farm* around these parts seemed just plain crazy. He started to feel better about the church commune he had orders to evict.

Sometimes it was hard to draw the line between the rights and wrongs of sodbusting, but here in the Sand Hills, there was no question about it. The country was meant for cows, and would always be meant for cows. He didn't need a crystal ball to see cows grazing here a hundred years in the future, and it made him feel sort of glad. The old, free days of the cowboy were numbered in a lot of parts he'd first seen as wide open range. Civilization kept sneaking west, faster than he felt comfortable about. The cattle drives up the Chisholm Trail were already a legend of the past. The Santa Fe Trail had just died under railroad tracks. They'd strung Glidden wire and were growing wheat where buffalo had roamed just a few short years ago, and the open range that had stretched from Canada to the Mexican border was shrinking like a slowly drying puddle after a summer cloudburst. It was nice to see some range they'd never tame. Nothing would or could grow here in the Sand Hills but grass, and as long as folks ate beef, there'd be no better use for this part of the West. The spirits or whatever who'd advised the Church of Ancestral Wisdom to homestead here had made a big mistake. Longarm saw it as his Christian duty to run them out before they starved to death or some cowboy gunned them for acting so foolish. He could see what the wind did once the sod was broken in these parts. It was surprising they'd lasted long enough for the government to take an interest in them.

It was midafternoon and hot as hell when they joined a line of telegraph poles and followed them over a rise to where the town of Sunbonnet dozed in a wide, flat draw. The town consisted of one street running north and south. Someone with a little sense had

planted a windbreak of cottonwoods between the settlement and the prevailing winds, but the main street, trampled dead by traffic, was a ribbon of dazzling sand, scooped two yards lower than the wooden walks of the sandblasted wooden buildings on either side. They'd ridden through the windbreak before someone spotted Victoria, but as they rode in the rest of the way, a band of about fifteen hands boiled out of the saloon to meet her. They came on foot, so Longarm could see that the one she greeted as Spike was even taller than he was.

Spike scowled up hard at Longarm until Victoria said, "This here is Stud. He helped me get past two of Claymore's hands who were laying for me in Alliance."

Spike smiled, but it didn't improve his looks much. He said, "I'm obliged to you, stranger. Who were the hands who trifled with you, Miss Victoria? Me and the boys are likkered up and ready to ride over to the Rocking K and have it out with the old son of a nevermind."

She said, "It's over, for now. Stud, here, left them on foot and likely scared some manners into them. One was that flashy Dan they call Pronto. The other was that older gunslick he rides with."

Spike frowned and gasped, "Pronto was after you, Miss Victoria?"

She nodded and said, "It sure looked like he was. I didn't think it'd be wise to have a long conversation with them."

"You'll want them gunned if they show their faces in these parts, then, right?"

"Well, you handle it as you think best, Spike. I don't want an all-out war with the Rocking K if I can help it, but they weren't too courteous the last time I saw them. I had to leave my buckboard at the livery in Alliance to get away. You might send a couple of good hands in to fetch it for me. They'd best be ready for trouble, if you take my meaning."

Spike nodded grimly, and said, "If they're still sitting on your buckboard, they'll be sorry, Miss Victoria. Will you be heading back to your spread now?"

She hesitated, looked at Longarm, and said, "I'm not sure. I have to give this horse and saddle back to Stud, unless he aims to ride out with us."

He didn't answer and she added, "You know you're welcome at the Diamond M, Stud."

He said, "You go on along and maybe I'll drop by later this evening for some coffee or whatever. I've got business here to tend to first. Why don't we all drift over to the telegraph office and just sort out our mounts and luggage before your hands escort you home?"

With the Diamond M riders trailing on foot, they rode to the only building the overhead wires led to, and Longarm slid off the pinto, hoping to get inside and have a quick word with the Western Union folks in private.

It didn't work. Victoria dismounted and followed him into the office. He decided he'd gotten away with about as much as he was likely to, and asked the clerk, "Do you have any messages waiting for Cantrell?"

The clerk said, "No. The only message I have for anyone not living in these parts in a Deputy Marshal Long. Got a wire for him from the Denver office."

Longarm sighed, took out his wallet, flipped it open to display his badge, and said, "That's me. Let's have her."

As the clerk handed him Billy Vail's wire, Victoria gasped, "For God's sake! You can't be a *law*man!"

He said, "I thought I might have mentioned that, but I can see I must have forgot to. Before you get excited, I ain't here on any business of yours. I disremember hearing anything you might have said that Uncle Sam might want to pester you about."

He didn't think she'd shoot him right then and there, so he turned away from her to read the wire, wondering why Billy had broken his cover so carelessly.

The wire read:

QUIT FOOLING AROUND STOP DEPUTY HARCOURTS BODY FOUND NEAR TRACKS SOUTH OF COLORADO LINE STOP WOMEN

ANSWERING DESCRIPTION OF KATE BENDER AND HER MOTHER PICKED UP IN CHICAGO STOP DETAILS FOLLOW IN NIGHT LETTER STOP FINISH YOUR JOB AND COME HOME STOP VAIL P. S. I AM NOT FOOLING

Longarm balled the wire up and threw it in the wastebasket with a frown. If Harcourt had spotted the Benders in Bridgeport, Nebraska, and followed them, it made sense they'd been headed south toward Denver when the young deputy backtracked on what he must have thought a more important job. But if the Benders had been picked up in Chicago, who in thunder had he mistaken for them in Nebraska, and if he'd made a mistake, why had someone gunned him and thrown him from the train?

He saw that Victoria was still there, grinning at him. He grinned back weakly and said, "My boss is too cheap to send enough at day rates to be worth reading, I thought by now you'd've lit out in a huff."

She said, "Not before you buy me a drink next door. I can take a joke, but I like to be let in on it. Why did you let me think you were somebody else, damn it?"

He didn't want the conversation to go any further in front of the curious clerk, so he nodded his thanks, said he'd come back for the night letter, and steered Victoria out and next door to the saloon.

Since she was a lady, they went back to one of the private rooms in the rear, and a faded dance hall gal in a dusty satin dress took their orders for draft beer.

As they waited, Longarm told her who he was and what he was doing in Sunbonnet. He left out the part about the dead deputy and the Terrible Benders. It was none of her business, just as her feud with the Rocking K was none of his, if he could manage to stay out of it.

She shook her head disappointedly. "I was sort of hoping to see you in action against those bastards. You *are* going to spend the night with me, aren't you? It's so much nicer in a soft bed after a hot bath."

He studied the tabletop between them as he said,

"I'd like that too. But what about Spike and your other riders?"

"Hell, I told you I don't mess with my hired help. Couldn't you tell I hadn't been screwed for months?"

"The suspicion crossed my mind. But you told me your husband was killed back in the last Sioux rising. That was more than just months ago."

"All right, I'm not a nun. I've been to bed with a few gents since they killed poor Luke, but never with any of my hands. Spike and the boys sleep in the bunkhouse, well out of earshot from my own house. Who I invite to spend the night out there is none of their business, and the last hand who asked about a handsome drummer passing through was handed his back pay and told to ride."

He nodded and said, "You told me you didn't like people pestering you. I might take you up on your offer before I have to leave. I reckon I'd better bed down here in town, tonight, though."

"The only furnished rooms are upstairs in this saloon, and the beds are full of bugs. How do you think I got that handsome drummer to spend the night at my place?"

He laughed and said, "Your maidenly modesty is starting to wear thin, ain't it?"

She met his eyes brazenly and smiled back as she said, "I *like* you, Longarm. I mean, I like you as more than just a damned good stud. You went out of your way to help me, knowing there was nothing in it for you."

The girl brought their beer and he waited until they were alone again before he said, "I was more than repaid for bulging a muscle at those two gunslicks, Vickie."

"Oh, sure, I enjoyed that part too. But I thought I'd hired your gun along with the nicer parts of you. I'll allow I'm not bad-looking, and your trip wouldn't have been as interesting if it wasn't for me, but Pronto and that other man are killers, Longarm. You've made my fight your own now, whether you aimed to or not."

He took a sip of beer and said, "I can see they

might feel testy about my blowing those ponies out from under them, Vickie. But I'm not too worried. I might drift out to the Rocking K and have a word with their boss. If your Colonel Claymore has any sense at all, he'll call them off. Gunning federal officers can make trouble for anyone, and he strikes me as a gent who plays a cool game. While I'm out there, I'll let him know I have my eye on those two and might take it sort of personal if they pester you or your hands. If I know his breed, he'll pay them off and send them packing. A hired gun recorded as such by the Justice Department is hardly worth having to feed."

She ignored her own drink as she protested, "You can't ride out there, bold as brass. Colonel Claymore is ornery as hell!"

"Oh, I'll make sure he knows I've left word with friends as to my comings and goings, honey."

"I tell you, he's crazy mean! If you ride out there alone, he'll have you gunned down like a dog and feed you to his hogs!"

Before he could answer, she added, "You'd best let me send some of my boys out with you, if you mean to ride up to his veranda in broad daylight!"

Longarm shook his head and said, "That would be one way to start an all-out war for sure! I'd never get to say howdy if he saw a stranger riding in with men he knew were on your side. As to going out in daylight, that's the civilized way to approach folks. Folks expecting trouble are more likely to shoot at moving shadows after dark. My plan is to sit tight here, till word gets around that a deputy marshal is in town. I'll drift out around suppertime and you'll see. He'll invite me to supper and act innocent as hell. If he was the whooping and hollering kind, he would have had his hands smoke us up back there in Alliance."

"Hell, he doesn't *own* Alliance! He doesn't have to pussyfoot with you here in Sunbonnet. He has the law in his hip pocket, here."

"Do tell? I reckon your range war hasn't gotten to the serious stage, then; we're sitting here having our suds in peace. Your hands are out front, bellied up to

the bar and still breathing. How many guns do you figure this Claymore rascal has to call his own?"

"About a dozen. We have the Rocking K outnumbered at the moment. I've told my boys to ride in bunches. That's not the same as your fool notion of bearding him in his den alone!"

He took another sip before he said, "Well, you may be right. But I've ridden into situations like this before. I'd say both sides are still at the dirty-looks-and-turning-over-outhouses stage. If he was ready for a stand-up showdown, we'd be having it about now. Why don't you go on home and let me worry about it? I'll try to drop by later to tell you how it all turned out and . . . whatever."

She said, "Be careful, darling. I'm looking forward to some more of your sweet whatever."

Then she left him there alone, her beer untasted. He looked at his watch, saw that he hadn't given the town time to gossip much about him, and settled back to enjoy both beers and a smoke before he made his next move.

Chapter 4

The law in Sunbonnet, such as it was, consisted of a worried-looking elderly man who ran the general store and post office when nobody was shooting up the town. It was an unincorporated county, waiting for enough registered voters for the state government in Lincoln to take it seriously. There was no sheriff. The town law had been appointed by his fellow merchants and had sent away for a mail-order constable's badge. There was no jail. He hadn't arrested anybody in living memory, and his jurisdiction was said to extend from the third telegraph pole past the stock corral at one end of town to the windmill at the other end. Longarm went to see him anyway.

The locals called him "Pop," but Longarm addressed him as "constable," and explained as much of his business as he thought the old man needed to know. The storekeeper led him to a back room he'd fixed up the way he thought a lawman's office should look. It had a rolltop desk, wanted posters thumbtacked all over the walls, and a couple of comfortable old leather chairs.

Longarm took a seat, and when Pop asked him where he'd be staying the night, he said, "I just hired a room over the saloon. My three critters are in the livery next to it."

Pop said, "They say there's bedbugs over there."

"So I hear. I pack a Winchester besides this Colt on my hip, so they'd better leave me alone."

Pop laughed and said, "You're welcome to stay with us while you're here in Sunbonnet. Our house is just out back, facing the other way. They were going to lay

out another street, so I built this store and my quarters with their back doors facing across the yard. They never got around to a second street, so the front door faces nothing but a mess of grass. Ain't that a bitch? Peggy says it's just as well, 'cause a street out front would just mean sand in our front parlor, but it seems to me a front door and veranda ought to face *some* sort of street."

"Well, your missus may have a point, sir. I noticed Main Street seems to be blowing away some."

"Oh, Peggy ain't my wife. My wife died three years ago, come December. Peggy's my orphaned niece. Her folks were run over by the Sioux back in '76. Lucky for her, she was away at school when Sitting Bull had his revelation. Peggy's the first in the family who ever went to college. I don't hold with overeducating females, myself, but my brother and his wife were inclined to spoil the child."

Longarm nodded, not really interested, and swept his eyes over the posters on the wall as the older man prattled on about the small-town lives of people Longarm had never met and probably never would. With Harcourt and the Terrible Benders accounted for, and Victoria Roundtree delivered safely to her private army, there was nothing keeping him here but the simple job a less experienced deputy had somehow managed to mess up.

Almost as if she'd been listening to his thoughts, Kate Bender's familiar face met his blue-gray gaze from a poster on the wall. As always, she wore a faint smile, and Longarm wondered what she'd been amused by when she sat for that picture, maybe eight or ten years ago.

More to change the subject than with any hope of learning anything, he said, "I see you have the wanted flier on the Terrible Benders. I understand the girl and her mother just got arrested in Chicago."

Pop swung his own eyes around to the printed photograph and shook his head. He said, "They arrest someone as a Bender at least once a year. Old Kate's too slick to ever be caught. Ain't she pretty?"

"Yeah, but most men would rather have a picture of Lola Montez, if we're talking about decorations. They say Miss Lola was wild and crazy too, but she never buried folks in her backyard."

"Come on, 'fess up, you'd like a night alone with that pretty little murderess before you turned her over to the hangman, wouldn't you?"

Longarm tried not to show his feelings. Dirty old men had a right to their dreams, too. He said, "I could tell you that better, once I had the cuffs on her. She ain't a pretty *little* murderess. They say she was nearly six feet tall. I know this is a dumb question, but you don't have any six-foot ladies skulking about Sunbonnet, do you?"

"The Benders, here in Sunbonnet? What in thunder would the Benders be doing out here in the middle of nowheres much?"

"You just answered your own question. The country's tamer, now, than it was when the Benders ran that haunted house on the Osage Trail a few years back. Deputy Harcourt reported that he'd spotted at least two of them as he was headed here. These Sand Hills are about as far away from the rest of the world as anyone can still get."

"Maybe, but wherever your sidekick met up with the Benders, it wasn't Sunbonnet. In the first place, I don't think there's a gal in these parts over five-six. In the second place, *look* at the gal! She's pretty enough to be on the stage. Do you reckon me and the other horny old hands out here would *miss* spotting them big brown eyes if they was within a day's ride?"

"It's an old picture. She might have changed some."

The constable scratched the white stubble on his loose-skinned cheek.

"Shoot, she'd only be about thirty now. No gal that pretty could change much in less than ten years. I've followed the case over the years. You may not think I'm a real lawman, but between selling crackers and posting letters, I've studied some. I got a book written by a Pinkerton detective and it tells all about disguises. A man can grow a beard; all a gal can do is change

her duds and the color of her hair. I'd know them big brown eyes if they stared out at me from an Indian squaw or a colored maid. I've said good morning to 'em for years now. Kate Bender ain't been through Sunbonnet. Ever."

"Let's drop it, then. I've got to go out to the Church of whatever and serve them an eviction. They told me, across the street, that those settlers are sort of spooky. They're a good ride north and I have a few chores to tend to before I give them the bad news. So I mean to ride out at sunup. Can you tell me who's in charge, and what you think of the outfit?"

Pop shrugged and said, "Their leader is a fat man they call Brother Seth. I suspicion he's crazy, but harmless. They come in here to buy supplies, and fair is fair. They pay cash on the barrelhead and don't argue about prices. Some folks around here forget I have freight charges."

"They sound prosperous. What are they growing out there in the Sand Hills?"

"Growing? They ain't growing anything. Everybody knows you can't grow crops in the Sand Hills, and Brother Seth says the spirits don't allow him and his followers to eat meat, so they don't have any cows."

Longarm frowned and said, "You mean they're just squatting out there on the range, doing nothing?"

"Oh, they have a windmill I ordered them from Kansas City, and some funny-looking buildings they put together from lumber they bought off me. So that's likely given them something to do. They mostly hold funny ceremonies out there, dressed in some kind of costumes or, some say, wearing next to nothing. They dance around, holding hands, and Brother Seth says the spooks of dead ancestors come up or down or somewhere from the Great Beyond to join the party. I've never seen a spook myself, but they're not bothering anybody out there."

Longarm shook his hea dand said, "There's *something* spooky going on, all right. I've read up on New Harmony, Salt Lake, the Shakers, the Owenites, and such. Every one of these Utopian bunches I ever heard

of had something they were selling. They made furniture, like the Shakers, or bear traps and silverware like the Oneida Community. The Mormons grow food for the transcontinental railroad. Even the communists depend on contributions. Where do you figure these white ghosts dancers get their money?"

Pop scratched his cheek again and said, "Beats me. I run the post office."

"You mean they haven't been getting money in the mail?"

"They don't get any mail at all. Not one letter in or out since they came out here a year or so ago. They're just *there*. The first we knew of them, here in town, was when Brother Seth came in one day, driving a buckboard, and bought a mess of groceries. They've been good customers ever since. There's maybe thirty or forty of the rascals living out there, and they buy everything here in Sunbonnet."

"Hmm, cold cash and no demands on anyone. I see, now, why they weren't run out before Land Management got around to noticing they were on government land. What about the cattle interests? Even if they're not taking up much room or harming the range, they're squatting on grass some other folks seem to be fighting over."

Pop nodded wearily, and said, "You mean the Rocking K and the Diamond M. The commune is smack on the line. Or at least, where the line would be if folks were reasonable. The street out front peters out to a wagon trace north through the hills. For years, the two biggest spreads in these parts had an unwritten agreement that the free range on either side was its own. Diamond M grazed this side of the road, and Colonel Claymore's Rocking K cows grazed the range to the east. The church commune likely knew this when they set up shop on the wagon trace a few hours' ride north."

Longarm shook his head and said, "That's sort of unusual, ain't it? I used to herd cows, and I've traveled some. Most outfits I know of don't worry so much about unfenced lines. Remember, we're talking about

open range, owned by Uncle Sam. The way it's usually done, the cows just graze as they see fit until roundup. It doesn't hurt to mix the herds, as long as the cows are branded. Come roundup, all hands ride out to round up everybody's cows. Then they cut and tally each outfit's cows from the community herd."

Pop snorted, "Damn it, you don't have to tell me how it's done, old son. I've been out here since the War."

"Then how come Miss Victoria and the colonel are so picky about grass that neither of them really owns?"

"Bad blood." Pop sighed, explaining, "The colonel was here first, so he didn't have to cooperate all that much with other outfits. Then Luke Roundtree came in here with his own herd, maybe ten years ago. He was from back East, so at first he made maybe a few innocent mistakes, or the colonel was right when he said some Rocking K cows had gone to market as Diamond M beef. Hands from the two outfits had a few fights too many on payday night, so getting them to work together out on the range wasn't easy. Both men were proud, and both of them hired men more likely to win a saloon fight than to be particular about the fine points of a neighborhood roundup."

"I get the picture. Whose idea was it to draw a deadline between the herds?"

"Mine. I told both Luke and the colonel I didn't have the time or the manpower to keep their hands from killing one another. I said I'd send for state troops the next time they tore up the town, and they agreed to keep their herds and help on either side of the wagon trace."

"Don't some cows wander, with no fence to stop them?"

"Sure they do. I have a couple of kids who act as my deputies and like to play cowboy. Once a month, I send them out to drive strays either way across the road. I asked Brother Seth to have his followers do the same and he said they would, if they spotted a lost cow when they weren't tied up with the spirits."

Longarm took two cheroots from his coat pocket

and handed one to the older man, saying, "I'd say you have a better handle on things than I was led to suspicion. I can see you're trying to hang fair in a situation where some folks would take sides."

Pop grinned as he took the smoke and lit up. He said, "Miss Victoria told you I was the colonel's pet, right?"

"Well, she didn't press charges of out-and-out bribery."

"I know what she said. The colonel says I'm on her side because I'm likely sleeping with her." He sighed and added, "Oh, Lord, if only he was right."

Longarm blew a smoke ring and asked in a desperately casual tone, "Tell me how she got involved in the feud. If her husband started it with the colonel, how come he's still got it in for Luke Roundtree's widow?"

Pop shrugged and said, "Just ornery, I 'magine. To be fair, there was some ugly talk when Luke was found dead out on the prairie one day. The Sioux were on the warpath that summer, but there hadn't been any sign of them in these parts. Victoria was sort of upset, I reckon. She'd only been married to Luke a year or so, and whoever killed him made a mess of his body. She said anybody with a knife and a mean disposition could scalp and mutilate a man after they'd shot him in the back from a rise. There were no arrows or feathers left behind as evidence, you see, and Luke had said his range dispute was likely to end in some killing."

"She accused the Rocking K of bushwhacking her man and trying to hang it on the Indians?"

"Not to his face. I talked her out of it. You see, the dead man's hands had been sliced up, Cheyenne-style. I pointed out that few whites knew the finer points of Indian warfare, and that she was setting herself up for a lawsuit if she made ugly accusations she'd never get anyone to believe. After a while, she thought it over and decided I was likely right and it must have been Indians."

"But not before a lot of black looks and ugly mutterings had been added as fuel to the fire. How long did

it take before both sides started breaking the agreement about the road between their ranges?"

"Not long. So far, it's been confined to missing cows and a few folks shot as trespassers. It hasn't come to open warfare yet."

Longarm whistled silently and asked, "Don't you call people getting shot sort of serious?"

"Well, I do and I don't. Miss Victoria and her boys shot a couple of men, one night, who seemed to be fixing to burn her out. They had matches and coal oil on them when they were spotted and gunned in her backyard. But when I asked the colonel about it, he said he had no idea who they were or what they might have been up to on Miss Victoria's spread."

"The bodies were never identified?"

"Nope. Looked like saddle tramps who'd do anything for money. They weren't regular Rocking K hands."

"She said the colonel was recruiting guns."

"I know. He accuses her of the same thing. A month ago, somebody shot the colonel's favorite pony out from under him as he was riding into town alone. Nobody on the Diamond M seems to know who might have done it, and nowadays the colonel rides with at least two of his hands for company."

"Right. Since you handle the mail, you'd know if either side has written the Land Office for extensions of their range allotments, wouldn't you?"

"I don't read other people's mail unless I suspicion it might be in the line of duty as a peace officer," the constable said indignantly.

"Come on, Constable, we're both professional men."

"Well, as one lawman to another, both spreads renewed their grazing permits as usual this year. It ain't like there's a shortage of grass out here. The two outfits just don't like one another."

"I can see why, but, in other words, neither side stands to profit by running the other off. It's just one of those dumb feuds."

"Yeah, and I'm worried sick about it. You can talk sense to folks who fight over money. Most of the really

ugly killings out here are sparked by simple, dumb dislike."

Longarm nodded and said, "I know. I've seen men killed because they hailed from the wrong state or wore their hat the way some other man said was funny."

"You have any ideas on how I can get the Diamond M and Rocking K to kiss and make up, Longarm?"

"Not hardly." He stood, adding, "I have to ride out to see the colonel before I do anything else tonight. I'll do what I can to calm the troubled waters, but to tell you the truth, you seem to have a bear by the tail and I don't envy you. I've seen these crazy situations before, and no one lawman can do much about them."

Pop followed him out through the store, complaining, "I've told them that, damn it. I've warned both sides that if there's any real killing, I aim to wire Lincoln for state troopers. I'm too old to fight a one-man war and too ornery to be trifled with. If they can't live and let live, I mean to swear out a peace warrant and run every gunhand out of these hills, cows and all!"

Longarm was about to ask if he had enough pull at the state house to do that, but a pretty little redhead was behind the counter of the otherwise empty store and the old man introduced him to her, saying, "Peggy, say howdy to Deputy Long. He's the mean one they call Longarm. I invited him to stay with us, but he says he likes the bedbugs over the saloon."

Peggy dimpled shyly and said howdy. Longarm got the impression that she didn't get to talk much around her old uncle. He touched the brim of his Stetson to the girl before he passed on, with Pop still chewing his ear about the terrible things he aimed to do to the next party that broke the peace in Sunbonnet.

Longarm left him still talking, and walked over to the livery. He gave a stablehand a nickel to saddle up the pinto while he went up to his hired room to fetch his Winchester.

While he was up there, he rolled the mattress off the bedsprings and sniffed at it suspiciously. He felt

better when he detected a faint odor of coal oil. The saloonkeeper had been sensitive enough about the legend of his bedbugs to do something about any he might have. Longarm had spent the night in enough strange beds to know the sickly smell of bedbugs by now. The room was bare and hardly the Palace Hotel, but it seemed clean enough and, what the hell, he didn't aim to stay much longer.

An hour's ride from Sunbonnet, Longarm followed the wagon trace around a cottonwood-covered knoll and saw a pole gate set in a Glidden wire fence with a windrow of tumbleweed piled against it. A sun-faded wooden sign beside the gate read: ROCKING K HEADQUARTERS. NO TRESPASSING. SURVIVORS WILL BE PRESECUTED.

He got down to open the gate. A dismounted man in faded denims stepped into view from behind a cottonwood and pointed a shotgun at him, asking quietly, "Can't you read, mister?"

Longarm finished opening the gate as he said, "Howdy. I'm a U.S. deputy and I'm here on business. Your boss would be up there in that frame house on the crest, right?"

The gunhand said, "You just hang your gunbelt over a fencepost, tether your pony, and I'll march you up to see if the colonel is receiving this evening, hear?"

Longarm said, "Aw, grow up, for God's sake," and led the pony through to remount. He said, "Close the gate for me, will you, sonny?" and started to ride on. The man with the shotgun fired. But he fired in the air, so Longarm didn't kill him. He steadied his spooked mount as he turned in the saddle, smiled, and said, "That was cute. If you fire that thing again, you're dead. We both know you ain't allowed to aim it serious without orders, but you're upsetting my animal here, and I'm allowed to gun almost anyone waving a gun at me."

Then he turned and rode on, not looking back. A shotgun was deadly at close range. He was too far

from the angry gatekeeper for the pellets to go much deeper than his frock coat and vest, so what the hell.

He was almost to the imposing frame house, which commanded a wide view from the top of its private sand hill, when two more men burst out of it, holding Winchesters. One of them called out, "What's going on? We heard a shot!"

Longarm rode to meet them, saying, "I heard it too. Your gatekeeper must have seen a jackrabbit or something. I'm the law, so point those things somewhere else. I don't aim to say it twice. I'll fool around with a shotgun at medium range, but I take it serious when folks point rifles at me, and you've already proven you saw me riding in."

A voice called out from the veranda that was wrapped like a skirt around the ranch house, and the two hands stepped out of Longarm's way, their gun muzzles lowered. He rode on up to where a man of about sixty sat on a straight-backed chair, with one booted foot up against a veranda post.

Longarm dismounted and dropped the reins to the ground before he walked over, hooked one of his own boots on a wooden step, and said, "They call me Longarm, and I work for the Justice Department. If you ain't Colonel Claymore, you must be one uppity butler."

The colonel laughed, but it was a dry, rattlesnake laugh with no real warmth in it. The older man was lean and fit for his age, and looked like he was used to giving orders. He said, "State your business with me, mister. I'll tell you right up front that I don't like to have my help hoorahed like that."

Longarm said, "Teach them some manners, then. You almost lost one down by the gate when he spooked my pinto. Fortunately for us all, I am a reasonable and good-hearted man. By now, some men I've ridden with would have smoked you up good."

"Bullshit. I don't hire sissies, mister. The only reason they let you pass is I told them to. I generally listen to a stranger before I decide whether he should live or die."

Longarm looked disgusted and said, "I'm so scared I'm about to wet my britches. What in thunder's *wrong* with you, Colonel? You've never seen me before and you're acting like a sixteen-year-old cowboy showing off in a whorehouse!"

The colonel rocked himself on the two rear legs of his chair as he growled, "I know who you are. You rode in with that slut, Victoria Roundtree. I know the way she gets young hairpins like you to take her side against me. I hope she gave you a dose of clap."

Longarm's eyes went gunmetal-cold as he moved up the steps in one catlike stride, kicked the chair out from under the seated man, and drew his .44.

The colonel hit the planks with a surprised cry, and a screen door burst open to reveal yet another hand standing there with a gun. Longarm snapped, "Back!" and bounced a .44 slug off the door jamb near his face. Then he swung the muzzle toward the colonel sprawled at his feet and said, "Call off your dogs. I mean it."

"It's all right, boys, we're funning!" yelled the colonel to the world at large, as he rolled to a sitting position and added, in a softer tone, "You must like to live dangerously, son."

Longarm said, "That makes two of us. I know you carved this little kingdom of yours out of nothing much, and you likely scared hell out of a few Indians doing it. You're the king frog in this puddle and when you say froggy, everybody jumps. But I hail from other parts and I've had men twice as tough as you for breakfast. So do you want to talk sensible and polite, or do I just swat you like a pesky fly?"

The colonel got to his feet, picked up his chair, and planted himself back on it before he marveled aloud, "Jesus, I don't know where they get you boys from, these days. You don't have much respect for your elders, son."

"I give respect where respect is due. That remark you made about the lady was insulting to both her and me. I know about your feud with the Diamond M. I didn't come here to take sides, but you have a mouth

on you that's tempting as hell. You force my hand, and I'll deal myself in."

"All right, we've both made our brag. I'm not going to have you gunned, and we both know you can't run me off my property with your bitty tin badge. What did you come out here for?"

Two reasons. I wanted to talk to you about those settlers up the road and how they figure in any plans you might have about the range dispute. The second thing I came to discuss was what we just had our set-to over. I aimed to tell you I was here on a case that didn't concern you or your cows, but you sure don't make it easy to stay out of it."

"All right, maybe I ain't as pretty as— Never mind, I don't want my ass busted again. If you're asking about Brother Seth and his crazy church, I ain't interested in joining it."

"I heard rumors some local cow men were fixing to run them out."

The colonel shook his head. "Not me or my boys. They haven't bothered me and mine."

The atmosphere had lightened up a bit by now, and it was obvious that Colonel Claymore wasn't going to indulge in any violent foolishness, so Longarm reholstered his Colt, then said, "I didn't expect a full confession from anybody. The point I want to make about them is that they'll be leaving these parts. I have a U.S. Land Office eviction notice to serve on them. I'm a peace officer, so I want them to leave peaceably, if you take my meaning."

"Shit, there's no need to worry about that. As far as I care, they're welcome to stay. They're not bothering anybody."

"Then who complained about them and got the Land Office all stirred up?"

"Not me. Maybe Victoria Roundtree complained to the government. They built their shanties on both sides of the road, to the north. They're not taking up enough space to matter. Since they dug the only well for miles, they're welcome to the only water there."

"Miss Victoria says she doesn't care about them one way or the other, either."

"Now don't kick my chair, but everybody knows she's been known to fib. She says I killed her husband and that I steal her cows too. If the truth be known, Diamond M ships more beef on occasion than anyone can seem to count on the hoof over yonder before roundup."

Longarm ignored that thrust as he considered more important mysteries. To give himself time to think, he stuck a cheroot between his front teeth. Talk about missing livestock went with the cattle industry the way gossip about a pretty gal went with backyard fences. He said, "If nobody here in Sunbonnet cares one way or the other about those religious whatevers, what am I doing here with an eviction notice?"

The old man shrugged and said, "Beats me. I never sent for you. I've sort of made my own law in these parts, up to now."

"I know. I met Pronto and your other gunslick over in Alliance the other night. If you want a professional opinion, neither one is very good."

A look of puzzlement flickered across the colonel's features.

"Pronto? Who's Pronto?"

"Come on. The long-haired kid with the fancy hatband. Miss Victoria said they worked for you."

"I told you she lies about me. I don't know who you're talking about. I've never had a man named Pronto working here. Wait a minute. You say a long-haired kid with a fancy hatband. Was he riding with another jasper, about thirty-five or forty?"

"That's them. They hoorahed me and tried to scare Miss Victoria."

"Hell," the colonel said disgustedly, "they're not working for me. They never did. They came out here about a week ago, asking for a job. I didn't like their looks, but I gave them a chance to show me how they roped. The one you call Pronto threw a community loop at a fencepost and missed. When we got done

laughing, we fed them and sent them on their way. I don't hire men who can't handle a rope, mister."

Longarm considered this as he chewed on his unlit cheroot.

"Hmm. You know of any other spreads they asked for a job?"

"Fair is fair. I hear they asked Spike Logan, over at the Diamond M, to take them on. Spike sent them packing too. There's a bit of fraternizing in the lower ranks, so my boys heard about it in the saloon in town. I don't like Spike any more than I do his female boss, but I'll allow he's a fair cowhand. He laughed at them too. They were just saddle tramps drifting through."

Longarm thought silently. The colonel could be lying. Or, if his story was true, two browned-off drifters might just have had it in for the owner of a spread where they'd been turned down . . . It didn't fit. They'd had no reason to pester a strange U.S. deputy like that. Their play, whatever it had been, had been serious. They hadn't just skulked around Victoria looking for sullen fun. They'd trailed her out into the Sand Hills with serious intent.

He said, "I reckon we can forget those drifters, for now. I've heard what you have to say, and told you where I stand. I'd like to leave you with a friendly warning before I ride out, though."

"Warning? You've no call to warn me about anything, son. I was holding these hills against Sioux and owlhoots alike before you started shaving."

"I know. You're tough as hell. I'm only going to be here a day or so and, like I said, it's not my duty to take sides in local disputes. I want your boys and those others on the Diamond M to sit the next few days out. I aim to finish my job and leave these parts quiet and tidy. So I'll take it personal if there's any gunplay while I'm here. I've told Miss Victoria to behave, too. If either of you starts a war before I ride out, I'll be riding with the side who didn't start it."

"God damn it, that's not fair. You're not supposed to hire out as a gun while you're wearing a badge."

Longarm struck a match on a veranda post and lit his cigar. "That's right. My boss makes me fill out papers every time I have to shoot somebody. What I'll have to do is run the outfit I'm sore at out of the country. That's what I did the last time I had trouble with one of you old-style cattle barons."

The colonel looked more puzzled than worried as he asked, "What are you talking about? Nobody is about to run me off my land without a battle that will make Bull Run look like a garden party!"

Longarm smiled pleasantly and said, "You called it Bull Run instead of Manasses, so I suspicion you must have ridden for the Union Army. If you were ever really a federal officer, you must know about the Sergeant's Club. I'm not an army noncom, but us lowly deputies use the same system. You know how one sergeant can fix a mean officer by getting another sergeant in the general's mess to pull a few strings?"

"Don't lecture me about the army, damn it. Get to the point."

"I thought I had, Colonel. You keep calling these hills your land, as if you held title to more than this quarter-section your house is sitting on. If push comes to shove, you don't own shit. You graze your cows on open range, the same as everyone else."

"What if I do? The Justice Department has no say about range rights!"

"Not directly. I'd have to get in touch with some clerks who owe me favors, in the Land Office. One federal hand washes the other, and if I were to feel testy, you'd have one hell of a time getting a grazing permit renewed anywhere I heard about."

The old man turned beet red and got to his feet, shouting, "Hold on! That's pure blackmail!"

Longarm said, "Nope. It's sweet reason. I've no doubt you have important friends in the state house, considering how high and mighty you act. But elected officials come and go. Civil servants in the back rooms go on forever. You keep saying you're an old army man, Colonel, so you know how files get mixed up, or how an application can get routed the wrong way."

"I'll have your badge for this! Get off my spread, you arrogant bastard!"

Longarm nodded, went back to his mount, and swung into the saddle to ride away as the colonel was just starting another tirade. Longarm rode off grinning and not looking back. He'd scared enough folks in his time to know when he'd done it right.

The colonel would probably write to some friends in Lincoln, and Billy Vail would doubtless chide him for abusing his position again. But he'd weather the storm as he had all the others. When the colonel cooled down, he'd figure that out, too. Longarm had him over a barrel and they both knew it. Sometimes it was hard to see why folks were so scared of a man who had a little more money and a few friends in high places. There wasn't anybody too important to obey the law, if the law was enforced by a man who knew his trade.

Chapter 5

He was almost back to Sundance when a rifle squibbed in the distance and Longarm felt the thud of a high-powered round hit his pinto just behind his left knee. The wounded animal bucked and he let himself go with it, falling off the far side as he slid the Winchester from its boot on the way down.

He landed on one hip and rolled as the gutshot pony crow-hopped a couple of times and fell, screaming mindlessly. Longarm gathered his legs under him and bounded for the downed animal as a second shot kicked up sand and grass stems where he'd just been. He shot the wounded pinto as he flopped behind it, then laid his Winchester across the still-twitching rump. The best thing about a situation like this in the Sand Hills was the lack of cover. The ridge the shots had come from was a hard, mustard-yellow line against the evening sky. There was nobody up there now. The bushwhacker had lit off down the far slope when he'd seen that his target was still alive and forted good.

Longarm saw there was no point in lying there doing nothing, so he jumped up and started loping up the slope the shots had come from. He moved in an infantry crouch, with his rifle's muzzle trained on the skyline as he swept it back and forth with his eyes and Winchester aimed the same way.

When he reached the top, he went over fast and low to avoid being outlined against the sky. A tendril of evening breeze carried a whiff of gunsmoke to his nostrils, but there was nothing to see down in the draw below. There was no cover, either. The bush-

whacker had made it over the next ridge to the east, if he hadn't gone down a rabbit hole.

Longarm studied the grass around him in the slanting light of the setting sun. The sod was too thick for hoofprints, but the grass up here hadn't been grazed much. He spotted a place where the stems had been cropped almost to the ground in a small circle and muttered, "One pony. Trained to grounded reins and standing there about an hour."

The shooter had been waiting up here for him to pass. After missing, he'd lit out mounted, so there was no sense trying to track him on foot with the sun going down.

Longarm walked back to the top of the hill and swept his eyes all around. He could see Colonel Claymore's hilltop house, far to the northeast, with its windows blazing in the sunset. The old cattle baron might have sent someone after him, but the bushwhacker hadn't trailed him from the Rocking K; he'd been waiting. Could the colonel have been expecting his call?

He shrugged this off as too tedious to worry about. He'd told a lot of people in town about his plans, long before riding out. The display of bravado at the Rocking K might have been the result of a long, anxious wait. But folks planning to gun a man tended to be more two-faced about it. Would you threaten a man you aimed to murder later?

He admonished himself, *Don't play chess when the name of the game might be checkers, damn it. You can squrrel-cage all night over 'he knows that you know that he knows,' and so forth. Let's eat this apple one bite at a time.*

He stared at the sunset to the west and the rooftops of Sunbonnet turning red to the distant south. He didn't know a thing that he hadn't known when his mount was shot out from under him.

Hadn't the colonel himself been treated the same way just a while back? Sure. They'd said he'd been shot at on the way into Sunbonnet. If the shooter was the same man, he needed shooting practice. Longarm

gazed down at the dead pony by the road and nodded. He knew that if he'd been up here, elbows braced against the ground with a high-powered rifle, anybody he'd aimed at down there would be dead, if he was serious about wanting him that way.

On the other hand, it was about medium-distant range, and Longarm was a good shot. He couldn't really say if the ambush had been meant to kill him or just scare him. He couldn't see why anyone would want to do either. He'd told everyone he was on a simple mission and would be riding out right away. Who in thunder had a motive for smoking up a deputy U.S. marshal? Unless they were hiding something big as hell, they were going about it all wrong. The Justice Department would come in here like angry hornets and look under every cow turd if another federal employee was murdered.

He grimaced and walked down the slope to the dead pony. He faced a long walk, and it would be dark by the time he lugged his saddle and gear into town. He owed the sheriff in Alliance for a horse, too. The chestnut Victoria had ridden out on wasn't as obedient, judging from the way it had acted on the trail, but it would have to serve. He didn't relish serious business on a balky mount. He scowled at the red and purple sky. *God damn it, that pinto was a friend of mine. Federal offense or not, I'm going to make some rascal pay for killing him.*

He uncinched the saddle and hauled it to one side of the dead pony before removing the bridle. The bit was covered with blood and vomit, and he wiped it clean on the grass, cursing. Then he put the Winchester back in its boot, hoisted the whole business up on one shoulder, and started walking.

A cricket woke up to serenade the first star in the darkening sky, and Longarm muttered, "Oh, shut up." He had some weary miles to go, and he didn't like walking too much, even without a load. So he was sore as hell, just starting.

Then he heard the grating of iron on sand behind him, and whirled to step off the sandy trace and face

the sounds. He saw a buckboard coming, pulled by a mule, with two people sitting on the spring seat. As he waited, they came nearer and reined in. The driver was a huge tub of a man in a dusty black suit. The woman at his side looked like a little old sparrow in a black Mother Hubbard and a sunbonnet.

The man said, "I think we just passed your horse back there. What happened, friend?"

Longarm said, "I'm still figuring it out. Could you see your way clear to giving me a lift?"

"Of course. We're going into town for firewood. I swear, I have to do everything myself. I told those boys two days ago the wood was getting low. But forgive me, friend. Our problems are not yours. Put your gear in the back and join us. I am Brother Seth, minister of the Church of Ancestral Wisdom. This lady is Sister Lilly, a member of my congregation. Don't bother talking to her; she's deaf as a post."

Longarm touched his hat brim at the little woman anyway, before he tossed his gear in the wagon bed and climbed up beside the oddly mismatched couple. Brother Seth clucked to the mule, and as they started out, he said, "It's a good thing I saw we were running low on firewood before the *sabbat*. We don't hold with worldly chores on the *sabbat,* and I wouldn't be able to do this tommorow."

Longarm had noticed the way he said "Sabbath," but assumed he had a speech impediment. He said, "I thought tomorrow was Friday."

Brother Seth nodded and said, "You worldly people call it that. Our scriptures reveal that both you Christians and the poor, benighted Jews are in error. The last day of the week is Friday."

Longarm shrugged and answered, "If you say so."

He had enough trouble understanding the difference between a Presbyterian and a Baptist, and everyone had already told him these folks had odd notions. The papers he had to serve on them were in his room over the saloon, since he hadn't intended to ride out to their commune before morning. He decided it was just as well, for the moment. It seemed sort of

nasty to whip out a dispossess notice right after a man had offered you a ride.

He said, "If Friday is the day you folks use for Sunday, you wouldn't want to be pestered with business matters in the morning, would you?"

"Hardly. We followers of the True Wisdom have few dealings with the mundane universe in any case. On Friday we celebrate the wisdom of those who have gone before us to a higher plane."

Longarm had no idea what he was talking about, but it hardly mattered. Once he served the fat man at his side with an order to get off federally owned land, there'd be nothing to keep a federal officer anywhere near Sunbonnet. His boss would expect him to come back to Denver.

But something funny was going on and, federal matter or not, Longarm knew he'd lose some sleep if he just rode out with everything up in the air. He knew Billy Vail wouldn't approve of his mixing in a range dispute, and the murder of his late pinto was a matter for Nebraska State, if he wanted to press charges. He could see Vail's answer now, if he were to wire that he was investigating the murder of a cow pony and the gossip of a small town. There was nothing to connect Sunbonnet with the mysterious death of Deptuy Harcourt. Even if Harcourt had seen the Terrible Benders, and the Chicago police were wrong about the women they'd picked up, the only thing connecting Harcourt to Sunbonnet was that he'd been headed here when he saw whatever he saw.

But Longarm had a feeling in his bones, and despite what Billy Vail and his common sense might tell him, he aimed to stay in this game long enough to study the cards a bit before he cashed in his chips.

He decided religious tolerance would be his best bet for the moment. The Church of Ancestral Wisdom would be too busy praying or whatever to be served with papers in the morning. There might be at least one Jew or Seventh Day Adventist in Sunbonnet, so he could hardly pester folks on a Saturday, and Billy wouldn't be in the office on Sunday. That gave him

three days to get a few answers before he got in serious dutch with the Justice Department.

Brother Seth broke into his stream of thought to ask, "Are you the federal marshal we've been expecting, friend?"

Longarm frowned and replied, "I'm only a deputy. But how did you know who I was?"

"You're a stranger in these parts, and I noticed that your horse had been shot. I thought you'd be coming out to the Gateway to serve papers on us, but you obviously had trouble with someone else."

"That's for sure. How did you know I'd been ordered out here? I only arrived this afternoon."

"Oh, we've been expecting you for some time. Our ancestors told us someone had complained to the mundane authorities about our commune."

Longarm decided not to argue about religion. He said, "They told you the truth. I wasn't going to bring it up right now, since you folks have been so neighborly, but you are on federal land, you know."

"Who says so, friend?"

"Who says so? Why, it's right on the government survey map. Almost all the range in these Sand Hills has been set aside for cattle grazing. 'No homesteading claims to be granted until further notice,'" he quoted.

"We don't recognize your worldly laws, friend. The Church of Ancestral Wisdom answers to a higher authority."

Longarm sighed and said, "The last gent who told Uncle Sam that was named Red Cloud. He said the Black Hills had been given to him by the Great Spirit."

"He may have been right, you know."

"Maybe. But the U.S. Army settled the argument with the Sioux, right or wrong. I was hoping you folks would be more sensible."

Brother Seth chuckled rather smugly, and replied, "Oh, we followers of the Truth are hardly as misguided as the poor Sioux, friend. We have no intention of *fighting* anyone. We simply refuse to recognize your so-called government. I'll be only too happy to accept your legalistic documents, whenever you feel like pre-

senting them. I know you have your job to do. It's not your fault you were raised in error."

"Well, I suspect my folks planned to have me, and they raised me as best they knew how. I wasn't fixing to serve you until Monday. So you'll have a few days to make other plans for your . . . what did you call your place?"

"The Gateway. We were commanded to build it here in these empty hills, as a portal to the higher planes. You see, the intersection of planes is finely calibrated, and you can't communicate with the spirits just anywhere."

"That sounds reasonable. But look here, Brother Seth. The U.S. government has some communications for you too, and no matter what the spirits say, you're going to have to move. There's plenty of unclaimed land you can file a homestead claim to, farther west. Couldn't you find one of these . . . whatevers, somewhere else but on open range?"

"We don't hold with filing homestead claims."

"So I noticed. And Land Management is sort of upset about it. You can recognize the government or not, but you're still going to have to move. I'm trying to make it as easy on you as I can. I'm not going to stand over you with a shotgun or order you about; I'm just going to give you notice and we can work out a reasonable date for you and yours to vacate. Just so you agree to get your stuff off that federal grass within, oh, ninety days or so. Ninety days is the most I can swing."

"We have no intention of leaving the Gateway until the spirits call us," said Brother Seth.

He sounded like he meant it.

Longarm didn't answer as he sat there next to the fat man and the silent little Sister Lilly. The preacher had already said he didn't aim to fight the U.S. Army.

Longarm said, "Look, I'm going to say I served you on Monday. I'm going to say you have a lot of gear and little in the way of transportation, and that you asked for a ninety-day extension."

"I told you we do not intend to obey your mundane writ. It holds no meaning for me or my people."

"Just be quiet and listen. I'll be riding out long before the time I'm offering you expires. You'll have time to appeal the orders in court, and there's a chance you'll make it. Nobody here in these hills seems to care one way or the other, and it's an election year. Politicians are sensitive about persecuting a religion, so if you appeal to the courts right—"

"We don't hold with voting for worldly offices, and we don't recognize worldly courts. I know you mean well, friend, but you're talking nonsense."

Longarm frowned and said, "You're the one who's not making sense. I just said I'd lean over backwards to give you a break. When I report back to the judge who's ordered you off that land, I'm aiming to say it was a routine eviction with a request for an extension. I don't aim to volunteer any open defiance of the law on your part. So just cool down and don't offer any."

The lights of Sunbonnet appeared around a bend in the wagon trace as Brother Seth said, "I'm not angry, so I can hardly cool down, friend."

"That's better. There's all sorts of ways to bend the law around, if you get a good lawyer and keep it polite. Let's see now. If I hold off until Monday and give you ninety days, you'll have ninety-three to work with. If I was you, I'd have my lawyer ask for a further extension pending the date of your hearing, and—"

"We don't hold with lawyers, either. What can I say to convince you that we True Believers are not of this plane you call the United States?"

Longarm sighed and said, "You've about convinced me, and I'm sure sorry. You seem like harmless folk, and it's nothing personal, but we seem to be headed for a head-on collision. I'm going to forget this conversation, and I won't say you told me to go to hell unless they ask."

"Come now, I never suggested you should transport yourself to a lower plane, friend."

"Right. I'll come out Monday to serve you, and you just do what you think best. I'd just like to point out that it can get sort of ugly if you push it to a showdown with a posse of federal moving men, but I can see I'm not getting through to you. I thank you for the lift, and I sure hope they'll give the job of evicting you by force to somebody else."

Brother Seth reined in near the general store, and Longarm jumped down with a nod of thanks to the little deaf woman. He got his gear from the wagon bed, and as they drove on to the cordwood yard, he legged it over to the saloon with his load balanced on one shoulder.

A piano tinkled in the saloon, and he saw that it was crowded as he came through the batwings. Spike Logan, the ramrod of the Diamond M, was leaning against the bar with some other riders.

Spike nodded and Longarm nodded back as he passed, saying, "Howdy. Lost my horse. I'll tell you about it after I put this gear in my room upstairs. Is the telegraph office still open?"

Spike said, "Think so. The clerk was in here looking for you, just a few minutes ago."

Longarm thanked him and headed for the steps in the back. He'd just put a boot on the first riser when Spike yelled, "Longarm! Duck!"

As Longarm dropped to one knee and threw the saddle to one side, the saloon was filled with the roar of gunfire!

He spun on his knee as he drew, facing the noise and confusion of the smoke-filled room. Men were diving for cover in every direction, and somewhere, a woman screamed above the gunfire. A table tipped over and rolled in front of Longarm, blocking his view but offering some cover. As he half-rose behind it, the sounds of gunplay died and there was a breathless moment of silence.

Then Spike said, "They threw down on you from behind."

Longarm stared through the blue haze of gunsmoke toward where Spike was pointing with his single-action

.45, and saw a hat with silver conchos lying on the floor amid some poker chips and playing cards. He spied the two bodies in the corner as the smoke began to lift and said, "Thanks."

The one called Pronto was half-sitting against the wall, with a surprised look on his dead face and a blossom of red in the center of his shirt front. His older partner lay facedown across his knees, as if Pronto had been about to spank him. He still had his unfired S&W gripped in his dead hand.

The town constable called Pop burst through the swinging doors with an old buffalo gun in his hands, yelling, "What's going on in here?" Then he saw the bodies and gasped, "Oh, my God!"

Spike said, "They were after the marshal here. I hadn't noticed them sitting there, but they must have been laying for him. Lucky for Longarm, we'd just said howdy and I was still looking his way when they rose in the corner and drew on his back."

Pop stepped gingerly over to the corner and nudged the two corpses with the tip of his boot before he said, "Dead as a turd in a milk bucket. Who the hell were they, Spike?"

Spike shrugged and said, "Don't know. I seem to remember that hat. I think they might have been a couple of saddle tramps who came by the Diamond M looking for a job, one time. I didn't like their looks and said we wasn't hiring. Looks like I was right."

Pop looked uncertainly at Longarm and asked, "Do you want to take over, Deputy? I've never handled anything this serious before."

Longarm said, "You're the law here, and saloon fights are a local matter. I met up with the recently deceased a few nights ago, over in Alliance. They followed me out of town and I thought I'd discouraged them. I can see now, they were serious. I owe Spike and his friends a round of drinks, but we'll set 'em up later. Do you have a coroner here in Sunbonnet?"

Pop said, "Doc Sawyer usually signs the death certificates around here. I reckon he's our coroner, if anybody is. I'll send for him. What do we do then?"

"Well, it's the custom to hold a hearing before the coroner's jury. Your town doctor will know the forms to fill out, if he's had any schooling worth mention. I don't see much of a problem here. Spike was acting as my deputy when he gunned those rascals to save my life."

Spike looked surprised and asked, "I was? You never told me I was your deputy, Longarm."

"Didn't I? I thought I mentioned it as I was passing, just now. You see, I'm allowed to deputize folks temporary if I need help on a field assignment. It saves a lot of needlesss jawing with the state courts if a man is working for the federal government when he has to gun somebody."

Spike grinned in sudden understanding and said, "I'll buy you one after we drink yours. Us federal men have to stick together."

Longarm nodded and, knowing how things could drag on at the scene of a shooting, once the excitement had died down, he said, "You boys take charge here. I'll be back directly."

He went back to where he'd thrown his gear, picked it up, and took it up to his room.

When he emerged a moment later, he locked the door and, removing a sulfur match from his pocket, broke off a piece of matchstick and wedged it between the door and the jamb. This simple maneuver had saved his ass on several occasions when he'd returned to a rented room and found the sliver of wood missing and someone unfriendly waiting inside the room to get the drop on him. It generally surprised such folks a trifle when they found a large U.S. deputy dropping on them, instead.

Downstairs again, he found, as he'd expected that everyone was still just standing around talking, while the bodies cooled in the corner. He told Pop he'd be in the telegraph office if they needed him, and left them to work out the disposal of the remains as they saw fit.

The Western Union clerk was standing in the doorway, wondering what all the noise had been about. Longarm said, "Just a couple of fools who thought

they knew more about shooting folks than they really did. I understand you were looking for me."

The clerk said, "I have a night letter for you from Denver," and led him inside. He went behind the counter and handed Longarm Billy Vail's longer and less expensive fill-in on the case of the murdered deputy. Longarm read it leaning against the counter, as the clerk fiddled with some funny-looking electrical gear on a table in the back.

The night letter didn't give Longarm anything very important to go on, it just said the same thing in more words. Harcourt's body had been found by a trackwalker, shot twice in the back at close range and apparently thrown from a Denver-bound train. He'd either followed his suspects aboard, or he'd been headed back with some urgent reason for abandoning his mission when he'd been murdered.

The woman picked up by the Chicago police had been living with her mother in a roominghouse near the stockyards. She claimed to be an actress down on her luck and working as a seamstress. A fellow boarder had recognized her from a picture in a magazine. The magazine had run another article on the old Bender murders and, as usual, had run the famous picture. The Chicago P.D. said they were sure the younger of the two women was Kate Bender, and since the older one admitted to being her mother, she had to be Ma Bender. The women were reported as hysterical and unable or unwilling to say where Old Man Bender and Junior were. They were being held without bail for the Kansas authorities.

Longarm noticed one odd note and read it over. It said, *Girl answering to want on Kate Bender is about twenty-five, five foot six, weight 135 pounds.*

That made her a good six inches shorter than they'd always thought Kate Bender was. But then Vail said, *Photograph a perfect likeness. Detective Murphy, Chicago P.D., compared ears of photo and suspect, using French method of identification. Perfect match.*

Longarm nodded. He knew that while two faces might look alike, few people had the same curls and

folds to their ears. The French police said no two people's fingerprints matched exactly, either. They were getting pretty scientific about such matters over in Paris these days. So Chicago probably had the gal in the old photograph. Five years one way or the other was hard to judge, the way women gussied themselves up. A gal pushing thirty could look twenty-five. Five foot six was tall for a woman, and nobody had ever really measured Kate Bender with a yardstick. Somebody had remembered she was sort of tall, and they just overdid it in her official description. That accounted neatly for the mystery of her getting past so many lawmen, too. They'd been searching all this time for a six-foot amazon with a pretty face. A pretty gal just a little taller than most wouldn't have attracted as much notice, even at the time. It sure looked like they had Kate Bender at last.

He picked up a pencil stub and a night letter form. He addressed it to the Chicago P.D. and requested that they send him news of further developments. Then he wrote, *If suspect claims to be actress, ask her if she knows any booking agents who can vouch for her. If she is really twenty-five, she would have been in school at time of Bender killings in Kansas. School records would show she was only about sixteen at the time.*

He signed it and said to himself, *They're going to think I'm a fool if they've already thought about records, and they're going to be mad as hell if they haven't.*

He saw that the clerk was wrapped up in his wires and switches, or whatever that thing was, and cleared his throat for attention. The clerk said, "Be with you in a second. I'm trying to get this damned magnet to stay put."

He turned a screw, put the stuff aside, and came over to the counter.

Longarm said, "I'm sending this by night rates. What *is* that funny contraption you're working on? It doesn't look like a telegraph key."

The clerk said, "It's a telephone. I've been putting it together from a kit I sent away for."

Longarm nodded and said, "I saw one of them once. That don't look like the one's I've seen before."

The clerk explained, "It's a newer model. Edison just invented a better mouthpiece, with carbon buttons. They say it carries your voice like you were in the same room. If I ever get it together right, that is."

"Who are you aiming to talk to with it? There's no telephone exchange out here, is there?"

"Hell, no. We're in the middle of nowhere, out here. I just like to keep up with the latest developments. Someday I may get transferred to a real office in a real city, like Omaha, and I'll be ready to do my stuff."

"I noticed things are sort of backward out here in the Sand Hills. I'm surprised Western Union has an office here in Sunbonnet."

"Oh, we don't make any money on this office. The line runs north to the army and Indian agencies. This place is just a relay where we feed a bit more battery juice to the overland wires. I guess they figured as long as they had to have somebody here to boost the current, they might as well pick up any trade there is."

"You don't send many wires, then?"

"Maybe one or two, now and then. The cattle outfits wire East for the beef prices. Sometimes kids away at school wire home for money. It's a mighty tedious job."

"Well, at least you have a hobby. Tell me something: has anybody wired money to the Church of Ancestral Wisdom lately? I've got an official reason for asking."

"I can tell you, officially or otherwise, nobody *can* wire money through this bitty office."

"But you just told me kids wire home for money."

"Sure they do. But it only works one way. The big Western Union offices back East have safes and money on hand. I don't. The little I take in here goes right to the bank down the street. I don't have facilities for anything but simple messages, and nobody has ever wired at all to those lunatics. I'm not sure they can read and write. But they tell me that such messages as they get come from the spirit world."

"They're on another plane. I rode in with a couple of them tonight. You probably can't tell me, but if you could, would you remember who it was around here who sent a complaint about them to the Land Office?"

The clerk thought hard, then shook his head, saying, "Nobody. I don't send enough wires to forget one to the government. That's why I've been so interested in your business. It's more interesting than most of the stuff I get to send. All that stuff about the Terrible Benders and a murdered deputy is exciting as hell, and my old woman and me were running out of things to talk about at night. I sure hope you'll be in town for a spell."

Longarm said he was glad he'd brightened the clerk's life for him, and asked him to bill the night letter to his home office. Then he left, to return to the saloon.

When he got there, a man who looked like he might be a doctor had just finished saying the two men in the corner were dead. Pop introduced him to Longarm as Doc Sawyer, and asked what they were supposed to do next.

Longarm said, "Mail the findings of the coroner to Lincoln and bury the remains, I reckon. I doubt if we'll ever hear from their next of kin. I'll file their descriptions with the Justice Department, and they'll put out a flier in case anyone was looking for them. I doubt if they were wanted for anything important, though. I keep up to date on such matters, and they were total strangers to me."

Spike was still there, of course, looking important, even though he'd put his gun away. He said, "I have them down as saddle tramps with a grudge. Miss Victoria told me she'd had trouble with them in Alliance, and for a while, I thought they might be after her. But, as you can see, it was Longarm here that they wanted to shoot in the back."

Longarm nodded, but he wasn't satisfied that things were that simple. He was sure he'd never seen either of the dead men before he'd run afoul of them in Alliance, and they had been seen here in Sunbonnet long before anyone in town could have known he was coming. The

idea that they'd ridden all this way to pay the Diamond M's owner back for not giving them jobs was as foolish as the notion that they'd trailed him, though. Unless they'd had *some* reason that made sense, they'd been a lot dumber than seemed possible. No man can stay mean-drunk long enough to ride sixty miles. They had to have had a better reason, and someone had gunned Deputy Harcourt in the back, too.

He sighed and said, "I sure wish one of them had lived long enough to explain a few things. No offense, Spike, but I wanted to ask them about some railroad connections they might have made."

Spike said, "I'm sorry. When I saw them throwing down on you, I just did what came natural."

Longarm said, "I'd have done the same if they'd been aiming at you. I've already said thanks, so why don't we belly up to the bar and wet our whistles while Doc here cleans up?"

Doc Sawyer said, "As long as we're discussing refreshments, I'd say they can just stay put, for now. Carrying out my semi-official duty has made me thirsty as hell."

There was a general movement to the bar as the two dead men were left, looking sort of wistful.

Longarm ordered drinks all around, but the bartender said the first round was on the house. He seemed to be enjoying the excitement too. Longarm knew they'd be talking about the shooting for years in a little one-horse town like Sunbonnet. Despite what Ned Buntline wrote in his Wild-West magazines, most nights were tedious in an out-of-the-way place like this.

He knew Spike was on his way to becoming the local legend, so he said, "I'd sort of play down what happened if I were you, Spike. I'm not trying to steal your thunder, and what you did was important to me. But a reputation as a gunslick can lay heavy on a man, if you follow my drift."

Spike nodded and said, "You don't have to tell me. Last time I had to shoot a man was six or seven years ago, in Wichita. Took me a couple of years and riding some heavy miles before I could stop looking over my

shoulder. There's always some fool kid figuring to build his own rep by gunning someone who's been pointed out as a tough hairpin."

Longarm nodded and held up his fingers to the bartender for another round as he said, "I'll say no more, then, since you seem to be a sensible gent. I take it the man you gunned in Kansas was put down as self-defense?"

Spike grinned and said, "I'd never have mentioned the matter to a lawman if I was wanted anywhere for the killing. I was just a kid, and so was he. I disremember what we was fighting about. I had no choice in the matter; he slapped leather first. You can check with Wichita if you don't believe me."

"Hell, I used to be a cowboy too. I generally take the word of a man who's just saved my life, Spike. I noticed you emptied your gun into the rascals."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That you ain't had much experience gunning folks. If you'd been a professional gunslick, you'd have fired a mite less expensively. I saw that you pack an old thumb-buster, too. The Peacemaker is a cowboy's gun. You're good. I can see you've practiced some. I'd bet on you against most wild hands on a Saturday night in Dodge, but I'd be surprised as hell to hear you shot folks for a living."

Spike looked sheepish and said, "I don't want to get too drunk to work in the morning, but you've got my number. It hasn't hit me yet, but I figure to have some bad dreams tonight."

"Don't drink too much more, then. The liquor doesn't help. It just makes the bad dreams meaner."

"Are you speaking from experience, Longarm?"

"Yep. I don't dream much, these days. Got the dreaming over with a few years after I had to kill a boy my own age in the War. It's a funny thing. It's never bothered me much, to kill an owlhoot in the line of duty. But those kids we had to kill just 'cause they were in another uniform sort of stuck with me."

Spike said, "I missed the War. I was just too young to go."

Longarm shrugged and said, "You didn't miss anything worth remembering, Spike. It was ugly when it got exciting, and dull as hell when it wasn't. But we're getting maudlin, so let's jaw about something else."

Spike shot a glance at the bodies in the corner and said, "I'd sure like to, but it's starting to hit me now. Look at the funny color that jasper's face is turning."

Longarm said, "Go home, Spike. Go home and go to bed with a book. Then read until your eyes get glassy and you catch yourself reading over the same lines. That's what I generally do."

Spike looked miserable and blurted out, "Damn it, I can't read."

Longarm nodded and said, "Braid a rope or something, then. Take a bottle to bed with you, if you think it'll help. Just get out of here and try to put it out of your mind for now. It's over."

One of the Diamond M riders with Spike had been listening, and he took the foreman by the arm, saying, "The lawman's right, Spike. It's time we rode home. We got them strays to look for, come sunup, remember?"

The big ramrod allowed himself to be led away from the bar. But as he was halfway to the door, he turned to the dead men in the corner and blurted, "Damn you! You had no call to act so mean, and I'm mad as hell at you!"

Then he left with his fellow riders, red-faced and looking like he didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Longarm stayed where he was and smoked a cheroot with his drinks, until the doctor got some of the boys in the bar to give him a hand with the bodies. They carried them out into the darkness to whatever lonely destiny the sawbones had in mind for them. The place started to quiet down as all but the serious drinkers drifted out. The bartender called to the old town drunk who served as his swamper, and told him to clean up the mess.

The old man threw a bucket of soapy water in the corner and began to run a mop around in the rusty-colored suds, muttering, "Why do they always shit their

britches when they die? You'd think a man would have sense enough to use the outhouse before he starts a gunfight."

Longarm could have explained it, but he didn't. He'd seen the same scene end the same way too many times, and he was feeling a little sick to his own stomach as the excitement wore off.

He knew it probably wouldn't have bothered him, since he wouldn't have known about it if things had gone the other way, but he couldn't help a slight shudder as he looked at the dry floor at the foot of the stairs and tried not to think of his own body lying there in a spreading puddle of blood and shit.

Getting shot was undignified as hell.

That was probably why it bothered him to think about it, and why his own hand was suddenly shaking as he snuffed out his cheroot.

Chapter 6

It had been a hell of a long day, and Longarm was sleepy as he walked down the hall to his room, but he woke up immediately when he saw that the piece of matchstick was missing from the place where he'd wedged it into the door jamb. Looking down, he saw it lying on the bare floorboards just outside the door. Someone had been in his room, and maybe was still there. He reached his big right hand across his body and slowly drew his Colt, stepping to one side of the door as he did so, and flattening his back against the wall. Cautiously he reached out and, turning the doorknob, tried to push the door open silently. It was locked. He wondered if perhaps the matchstick had simply fallen out. This had happened once, and he'd busted the door down and gone diving into the room, overturning the bed table and dumping the washbasin and pitcher on himself. He'd felt a mite foolish, standing there dripping as he explained to the irate landlord why he was smashing the place up and generally disturbing the peace.

This time he was more circumspect. He took out his key, inserted it in the lock, and turned it. It wasn't nearly as quiet as he'd have liked, and if there was anybody in there, he knew they were ready for him. Hunkering down as close to the floor as possible, he turned the knob and pushed the door open, aiming his .44 into the darkness within. If somebody was set to gun him, he hoped they'd be aiming high and their muzzle-flash would give away their position.

Nothing.

He straightened up, and was reholstering his sixgun when a female voice said, "Oh!"

He froze. Then the same voice said, "I must have dozed off," and he located its source, in his bed.

"Vickie?" he said, shutting the door behind him and plunging the room once more into darkness. He was glad he hadn't come barrelassing into the room, leaving a wake of destruction behind him. Aside from the possibility that she might have gotten hurt, the commotion would have brought folks running, and it wouldn't have done at all for her to have been discovered in his room.

He was answered by a giggle, then the voice took on a wicked purr as it said, "Oh, so Victoria Roundtree puts out, does she?"

A light flared, and he saw that the woman in his bed was holding a match of her own. She was the barmaid who'd served him and Victoria in the back room that afternoon. She wasn't wearing the sleazy satin dress; it was hanging over the bedpost. This explained how she'd gotten in; she must have used a spare key.

She wasn't wearing a stitch of anything as she asked, "Satisfied?" and blew out the light.

Longarm didn't answer as he sat down on the bed beside her. He didn't reach for her, either. He could see where business might be slow in a small cow town like Sunbonnet, but he wasn't in the habit of paying. On the other hand, he didn't want to just throw her out, mad, to spread gossip about him and Victoria Roundtree. He cursed himself for the slip, but he knew it hardly mattered. The girl had probably been listening in on them downstairs. She wouldn't have acted so boldly had she taken him for a Bible salesman.

He said, "Satisfied ain't the problem, ma'am. I'm traveling on an expense account, and I'm trying to figure out if we can fit you in without a lot of tedious questions from the taxpayers."

"Did you take me for a whore?" she hissed indignantly, adding, "I'll have you know I *own* this place!"

"Good grief! I sure hope that man downstairs ain't your husband!"

"Don't be silly. Johnny works for me. I wait on

tables when he's busy because there's not enough business in a town this size to pay for me to hire a waitress. You'll have noticed by now that we don't have the usual dance hall gals, either. Most of my regulars are family men. A whore would starve in Sunbonnet."

"Yeah, I can see how everybody has to double up. The storekeeper is the town law, the doc is the coroner, and now I find that my landlady doubles as a barmaid. Appearances sure are deceiving out here in these sandhills."

She put a hand on his thigh and said, "I know. Now that you know you don't have to pay me, what do you say?"

"Howdy?"

He laughed, skinned out of his duds, and climbed in bed beside her. He hadn't really looked at her downstairs, and the momentary match flare hadn't revealed much more than a pretty face and a nice pair of breasts on a body not obviously deformed. So the old joke about not knowing a gal if you woke up in bed with her applied. He knew her clothes were threadbare and her business establishment was built of basic, unplaned lumber, on a balloon frame of exposed two-by-fours. But the liquor was honest stuff, and she kept the rooms clean. There were worse places he'd spent a night, and uglier gals he'd spent them with. He didn't want his landlady mean-mouthing Vickie, either. There wasn't a better way of shutting a woman up than to let her in on the action.

He reached out for her in the dark, and took her in his arms. Her hair, as he remembered, was dishwater blonde. She smelled of violet toilet water and larkspur lotion, so she probably had no lice. He kissed her, and as he started exploring with his free hand, she cuddled closer and said, "I was so scared when I saw those two men draw on you downstairs! I thought I'd lost you for sure!"

"That was you I heard screaming, huh?"

"Yes. I was just fixing to follow you up here. I'm not usually this bold, but when I saw Spike whip out his gun right between us, I didn't know what to do!

Then you were waving your own gun about, and the room was filled with smoke and yelling men and, well, I just ran up here and popped into bed where I'd be safe."

He said, "Safe from gunplay, anyway," as he ran his hand between her thighs. He discovered that she'd shaved her pubic hair, and tried not to show any hint of surprise as he gently fondled her in the inky darkness.

She murmured, "Do it. Take me. You don't have to get me hot. I've been hot for you since you rode in this afternoon!"

He didn't argue. Her silk-smooth flesh was tantalizing as she thrust her mons up against his cupped palm. He put his lips to hers, and as she kissed him back warmly, he rolled over on her and she spread her thighs to welcome him. He was surprised at the trouble he had getting in. She was moist with desire, but tighter than he'd imagined she'd be, considering her forward manners. She helped him with an expert movement of her pelvis, and as they suddenly slid together, she gasped, "Oh, yes! I knew you'd be hung nice!"

He didn't answer. His appetites were simple and he tended to satisfy them directly. A good meal didn't need fancy seasonings, and a good lay didn't call for dirty talk or acrobatics. He still didn't know her name, and he was sort of surprised he hadn't spotted her as a woman worth running after, down in the back room. The pretty face of Victoria across the table had conspired with this one's nondescript dress to hide the fact that she was built just right and must have been tailor-made with his dimensions in mind. He got a hand under each buttock of her bouncing rump and pulled her on like a glove.

He held himself back, making it last for both of them until she suddenly went limp as a dishrag in his arms and he let himself come. He couldn't believe anything could feel that good without killing you. But he was still alive when he could breathe again. He lay there, soaking in the sweet warmth of her body as she

caressed his back, and he wondered what it was about her that made it so nice.

He'd been getting plenty of damned fine loving from Victoria the last few days. Victoria was prettier, and nobody could have been built better. This gal, whoever she was, was a bit older and softer. Her breasts, while nice, were less proudly firm, and as he ran his hands over her, there was a little roll of flesh above her hipbones that she'd have to watch out for in a year or so. Yet he felt better and, somehow, *friendlier* in her arms. It was sort of crazy. She was a cow-town landlady who wasn't the least bit bashful with her favors. A less gallant man might have put her down as a slut. But she felt good and seemed clean, despite her awful cheap perfume. She murmured something and kissed his collarbone as he stayed in her, not moving, and at last it came to him what it was.

He said, "You're a nice person."

She giggled and answered, "Well, we sure have been acting friendly. But I'm starting to feel a little ashamed of myself, if you want the truth. I know you won't believe this, but I seldom lay in wait for my boarders in their beds."

He said, "I believe you. What I meant about you being nice had nothing to do with us being here like this. Neither one of us is a kid, so I'll admit I'm not a virgin if you will. Most gals, when they're that excited, tend to claw and groan and such. You just made sweet, natural love and I thank you for it. I know this is a dumb time to ask, but what's your name, honey?"

"They call me Flo, but I like 'honey' better. I don't know how I'll ever face you in broad daylight. I swear to God, I never meant this to happen. I remember thinking you were nice-looking and somehow, well, exciting, when I served you and Victoria Roundtree downstairs. But I never thought— I mean, those guns went off and I thought you were dying, and something inside of me started cussing and hurting like fire. I thought, My God, he's dead, and you never got a chance to know him at all. And then I saw you were

still alive, and you looked ten feet tall in shining armor and I reckon I just went crazy."

He started moving again, gently, as he soothed, "I'm glad, Flo. I never might have found out how nice you were, had both of us stayed sane. I remember thinking how pretty you were and feeling sort of regretful that I was only passing through."

"Oh, you're just saying that to pleasure me. I know I'm sort of plain."

"Not so," he lied, thrusting teasingly as he gallantly insisted, "You're a pretty little thing, and you know it."

She said, "Well, I try. I sent all the way to Lincoln for my hostess dress, but it didn't fit right and it's a mite worn and . . . Oh, do that faster. I know you're just trying to make me feel good, but you are, both ways."

They climaxed again, and he kept going. It was easy. Flo was simple and friendly, with no apparent desire for experiments or unusual positions. She was simply a warm, sweet, natural woman who'd been meant to satisfy any man, and she needed no tricks. She was the sexual version of steak and potatoes, the kind of gal most men married, if they had any sense.

As they cuddled and shared a smoke, Flo told her story, which was as unexciting as her appearance. She was a farm girl from Iowa who'd married a saloonkeeper and moved out West a few years back. Her marriage had been a good one, and they'd had one kid. Then her baby had died of whooping cough, and a year or so later, her man had just dropped dead one day as he was unloading a wagon. Doc Sawyer had said it was a heart attack. Flo wasn't bitter. She spoke fondly of her dead husband and child, and it was obvious that she missed them.

Longarm figured she wasn't the smartest woman he'd ever met, but he had to give her high marks for soul and disposition.

She affirmed this a moment later by confiding, "I really had no call to mean-mouth Victoria Roundtree. I don't like her, but she lives her own life as tidy as I

live mine, I'll allow. Anything between Victoria and you ain't my business, and I'm sorry I said what I did. I reckon I'm just getting spiteful and jealous in my old age."

"You ain't as old as me, he replied. "And there's nothing for you to be jealous about, if you ask me. You're both handsome women. In some ways, you've got a lot in common."

"I figured as much. I'd ask you for the details, but I know you'd never tell me."

"I meant about you both being pretty widow women with your own businesses and all. Anything else I may happen to know about a lady stays inside my mouth. You'll feel better if you remember that in the cold, gray dawn of a mighty small town."

"Hell, I'm not worried about my reputation. The high-toned ladies of Sunbonnet already have me down as a saloonkeeper."

"What's wrong with running a decent saloon where the liquor's uncut and the prices are fair?"

"Nothing. But did you notice, when you were down in my back room with Victoria, how she acted like I wasn't there? It's the same when I pass the telegrapher's wife or the schoolteacher on the street. They look sort of *through* me, like I wasn't there."

"Do the *men* in Sunbonnet tip their hats to you, Flo?"

"Oh, sure. Most of them are regular customers."

"There's your answer, then. You're the pretty gal the other ladies lose their menfolks to, of an evening. They're jealous of you."

"Go on! Everybody knows I don't run that sort of a place! I know I've been bold as brass with you, but there's been no monkey business with my regular trade. You'll likely call me a liar, but I haven't slept with any man for months."

He believed her—not because of the way she'd just made love; any woman could fake more hunger than she really felt—but he knew how few professionals in the saloon trade put out to regular customers.

He'd never figured out why so many men wasted

time and tips trying to get next to a pretty barmaid or waitress. Any man with common sense should know no woman would work that hard for a living if she was inclined to leap in bed with a free spender at the bar. If they weren't out-and-out whores, dance hall gals led lonely lives.

Some were married on the sly, or else they slept with the owner or bartender. The smiles and winks they threw at the regulars were just chores that came with the job. Flo would have been out of business by now, if she'd entertained many of the townies or ranch hands of Sunbonnet as she was entertaining him. She'd said her husband had been dead a few years, so there'd been others. But, like himself, they'd been strangers passing through: traveling salesmen, cattle buyers, maybe an Army scout or two. He didn't want the details, so he didn't ask. It made him feel better that there'd been others since her late husband. Flo knew how the game was played, and though they'd remember this night fondly, there'd be no tears and recriminations when it was time for him to leave.

He kissed her and said, "Damn it, you're a good old girl."

She took his cheroot from him, snuffed it out in the cracked saucer provided for the purpose on the night table, and said, "*Show* me how much you like me, lover."

He laughed and groped for her as she lay on one hip, putting out the smoke. The angle was interesting, and he slid into her from behind.

She gasped in pleased surprise but said, "Ain't that sort of dirty? Doing it like critters?"

He said, "Nothing's dirty, if it feels right," and she started to move her rump, laughing with him and obviously enjoying it.

Flo slipped out of Longarm's hired room before midnight, refusing to let herself fall asleep in his arms. Her day crew had orders to rap on the door of her own room when they reported to work in the morning. Friday was payday, and they'd be on time. In a small

town, a lady had to be discreet. She said she was looking forward to Saturday night and the opportunity to spend the morning in bed with him.

He kissed her one more time and started to light the lamp, saying something about making sure the evidence of her visit wasn't too obvious. She said she didn't get enough boarders to justify hiring a chambermaid, and added, "I'll be doing this room myself, later in the day. None of my help ever change the sheets, so what the hell."

He said, "It's your rep, honey. But would you like a tip from an old lawman who's good at reading sign?"

"What's that, dear?"

"Go easy on that violet toilet water before you hop in the beds up here. If I don't take a bath with naptha soap before I pass upwind of anyone in Sunbonnet, they won't need spotted sheets to know where I've been. That larkspur lotion you mixed with it cinches it. It's a sort of rare combination, ain't it?"

She sniffed and said, "A drummer passing through a while back spread word around town that he'd found bugs in my place. I didn't see any, but it upset me dreadfully. I hate bugs. That's why I combed larkspur lotion through my scalp and shaved my you-know."

"I noticed the coal oil on the bedsprings. He was just using bugs as an excuse."

"An excuse? An excuse for what?"

"Didn't he check out and spend the rest of his stay elsewhere? Maybe boarding at the Diamond M?"

She gasped and said, "My God! I knew you were a lawman, but you're *spooky!* How could you tell that Victoria Roundtree did me out of a handsome traveling man by smelling my infernal bedsprings?"

He laughed and said, "It's an art. Anyhow, the drummer didn't make as smart a move as he might have thought he was making."

"Oh? Well, I thank you for the compliment and I'll not ask you how you know, since I just got more than even with her. I'll see you at breakfast but . . . my help . . ."

"Mum's the word. I'll be up and out of here early in

any case, Flo. I've got a mess of chores to tend to. There's something funny going on in these hills, and I mean to have some answers."

"I thought all you had to do was run those religious fanatics off the government range, honey."

"So did I. I've already spoken to Brother Seth, and that part's as good as done, whether he accepts my writ or not. What I'm curious about is the shooting up of U.S. deputies by persons unknown."

"Spike got the killers, didn't he?"

"He shot a couple of saddle tramps somebody hired. When I find out who hired them, I mean to ask why. None of the reasons anyone's come up with make a bit of sense."

She said, "Well, you're the one who reads sign. I have to go, darling. I'll clean this room up after you ride out for the day."

Flo let herself out and he locked the door after her, bracing a chair under the knob. He rolled up the braided rug and scattered some wads of crumpled newspaper on the bare floor boards. Then he put his derringer under the pillow, hung his gunbelt over the bedpost, and lay back down. The bedclothes still smelled of her toilet water and insecticide, and he chuckled fondly as he let himself drop off into dreamland.

What he'd told Spike about his not dreaming anymore had only been meant to make the Diamond M ramrod feel better. The dreams were a bitch. But when they got really bad and he knew that he'd never draw his .44 in time, through this thick glue all around, he snorted, "Hell, I must be having a nightmare," and woke up.

It was broad daylight on the other side of the pulled-down shade, so he knew he'd slept at least six or eight hours, even if it didn't feel like it.

Longarm hated getting up, so he did it pronto and got it over with. As he stood naked and covered with goosebumps in the morning chill, he wished fondly for a wake-up swallow of his accustomed Maryland rye, but he hadn't had any since Denver, so he had to make

do by washing himself all over with the string rag and soap cake Flo had left by the pitcher and wash-basin on the dresser. He saw by his image in the cracked mirror that he needed a shave. He had a razor in his possibles, but there was a barber down the street, and he made it a habit to visit barbershops in small towns. Aside from saving yourself a cold shave, you could pick up news no paper got around to printing, once you let the barber know you didn't mind a man who chatted as he worked.

He went downstairs and out, without exploring the lower floor for a possible breakfast. The main hall of the saloon was locked and shuttered, so he let himself out a side door. He found the Western Union office and the beanery on the corner closed, but the barber was open for business and there were customers ahead of him. Sunbonnet rose early and went to work clean-shaven, it seemed.

Pop—the storekeeper and postmaster as well as town constable—was in the chair getting shaved and holding court. As Longarm took a chair and picked up a magazine, Pop introduced him all around. It was clear that the locals were still excited about the shooting. Longarm smiled modestly all around and tried to stay out of the conversation. He had nothing to contribute, and he'd learned how much a stranger could pick up in a barbershop bull session if he let the others talk.

Pop said the dead drifters had been propped up and photographed by the local part-time portrait photographer. Then they'd been planted, with little ceremony, near the church, just off the property line. The churchyard was reserved for the congregation, but what the hell. The Sunbonnet parson had said a few words over them anyway. Parson Meeker was funny that way. One of the other men said the parson just liked to stick his nose in other people's business and asked Longarm what he thought.

Longarm shrugged and said, "You'd better watch Parson Meeker. I wouldn't be surprised if he was a Christian."

There was a chuckle all around and another man asked, "Ain't you mad at them owlhoots, Deputy? They came close to making you a customer of the parson. I sure wouldn't want them buried decent if they'd tried to shoot me in the back!"

"What would you have done, then? Mounted their heads on your wall? They generally say a few words over a man when they hang him. I have enough on my plate with my *living* enemies. I don't see much sense in holding a grudge against dead idiots."

Pop said, "They were dumb, all right. I didn't see it myself, but according to the boys in the saloon, they almost could be said to have committed suicide. Imagine, two total strangers, trying to draw on a man in a barroom filled with grown men! Gus Winslow tells me he'd been keeping an eye on them and would have shot them himself, had not Spike Logan moved a mite faster and emptied his .45 into the rascals!"

Another man said, "I was there and seen it all! I didn't like the looks of them two, sitting over in the corner and talking sneaky-eyed. 'Course, it wasn't my business to ask 'em what they were up to, but I wasn't a bit surprised when the shooting started! I had my head turned away, but I remember thinking, when I heard the first shot, it was sure to be them two strangers."

Longarm didn't comment. The magazine he was thumbing through was a ladies' fashion book, and he wondered what it was doing here. There were pictures of nice-looking gals, and some of them were in their underwear, but they were standing around as refined as if they were at a tea party. He saw where you could send away for a horsehair rat to make your gal's hair look longer than it was, worn up. He wondered if Flo or Victoria could use a present like that, and decided he'd just get in trouble if he asked.

The conversation droned on, repeating itself. He leafed on, half-listening. They were rehashing every move every man in town had made the night before, but there was nothing in any of it he didn't know already. Apparently, now that they were dead, everyone

in town had known they were up to no good. They agreed that Spike was a good man and that they'd been fools to go up against him. Longarm could see how, in a few days, his own part in the affair would be forgotten and the quick thinking of the Diamond M ramrod would become another saga, with the dead men trailing Spike up from Kansas to avenge the man some said Spike had killed down there, defending a woman's honor. They'd already missed the point that neither of the gunslicks had even been looking Spike's way, and must not have known what hit them. Longarm figured he owed his life to the fact that he'd just said howdy to Spike in passing, and if they wanted to make him a hero, so be it. The Lord knew, few working cowhands ever got the chance to be a hero. Spike had earned it as much as many a famous gunfighter Longarm knew. At least the ramrod hadn't gunned two unarmed trail hands in the back!

He turned a page and frowned down at an oddly familiar face. There was an article entitled "The Esthetic Movement" under it, and the caption said the funny-looking dude in the picture was Oscar Wilde, the Esthete. Longarm had never seen the word before, but he decided it must be a polite word for sissy. The dude had long, wavy hair and a calla lily in his buttonhole. From the expression on his pouty face, he'd just smelled something awful when they snapped his picture.

Longarm had heard about Mr. Wilde, of course. He was said to be a pal of Miss Langtry, the Jersey Lilly. He turned the page, hoping there might be a picture of Miss Langtry, but there were only more mail-order ads, so he studied Oscar some more. There was something familiar as hell about that face. Longarm knew the man wasn't wanted for anything in the U.S., but he'd seen a face, or maybe an expression, that the picture reminded him of. It bothered him that he couldn't put them together.

The barber said it was his turn, and Longarm saw that most of the others in the shop were just shooting the breeze rather than waiting to get a shave. As the

barber put the cloth over him, Longarm asked him to swing the chair so it faced the door, and he put his pistol in his lap. He felt pretty safe at the moment, surrounded as he was by men who seemd to be on his side. He didn't expect to be gunned in the chair, but there was no need to start getting careless. People had tried it, more than once.

The barber shaved him, and Longarm asked him to rub some bay rum in. The man hadn't said anything about smelling violet water, but the soap Flo had left him hadn't had much hair on its chest, and he doubted that another woman within a day's ride mixed her scents so oddly.

He left the shop and started for the telegraph office. The sky was the color of galvanized iron, and the air around him smelled like brass. A long line of crows sat on the telegraph wire above the Western Union office, and as Longarm went in, he called out, "It's going to rain cats and dogs and blow some, sure as hell."

The clerk was sweeping the floor. He said, "I know. You can feel the electricity in the air. I'm sure glad I ran a telephone line to my house. My woman's keeping an eye to the south from the top floor, and I told her to call out if she spies another twister."

"I noticed most of the houses have cyclone cellars out back. You ever get a really mean one, here in Sunbonnet?"

"No. You can see the town's still here. There's an Indian legend about a really nasty twister back in the Shining Times, though. Wiped out a Crow village over near Hunter's Rock."

Longarm decided they'd talked enough about the weather to be polite, and asked the clerk if he had received any replies to his wires. The clerk shook his head and reminded him it was still early.

Longarm said, "It's an hour later in Chicago, and Friday is a working day. The Chicago police probably don't want advice from a rube lawman out in the Wild West."

"Well, if they identified their suspect by the Bertillon system, they must have the right gals."

Longarm didn't accuse him of reading other people's mail. One of the disadvantages of communicating by wire was the fact that you had to blab everything to any stranger Western Union had seen fit to hire.

He said, "Bertillon's ideas have improved identification some, but we've a long way to go. I'll agree the shape of the skull doesn't change a hell of a lot, once a person's grown, but there's still a lot of play in the loose flesh growing over the bumps. I know a gent in Denver who keeps getting arrested as Frank James. He's a respected pillar of the community and goes to church on Sunday, but he's a dead ringer for at least one of the James boys, and he's almost been shot a couple of times."

"Well, what if you're right and the police back East are holding the wrong ladies? That still doesn't say the Terrible Benders are around here. At one time or another, I've had just about everyone in town as a customer, and I've never laid eyes on anyone answering to those old wanted fliers."

"Do you send many wires for the Church of Ancestral Wisdom?"

"Oh, hell, they don't count. They're all crazy."

Longarm nodded and went out. He returned to his room and got his saddle and gear. There was a slicker in his roll, and judging from the sullen sky, he figured to need it before the day was over. He lugged the gear to the livery, where he found the chestnut from Alliance trying to bust out of its stall. The young boy working there said all the horses were acting spooky as hell.

The lawman led the chestnut out back and steadied him as the boy saddled for him. Longarm said, "The critters smell a storm coming. I notice you keep them in blind stalls with boards between them and their next-door neighbors. I'd leave them out here under the overhang facing the corral, if I were you. Horses don't like to be in solitary confinement, no matter what the weather's like. Let them stand out here where they can jaw together about that funny smell in the air, and you'll find them easier to handle."

The boy asked, "Ain't they likely to mill about and try to get out if there's a real storm?"

Longarm replied, "Why should they? The oats and shelter are *here,* unless a twister comes down the street, in which case it won't matter. Horses are funny that way. Leave one alone in a square section of clover, and he'll sure as hell jump the fence. Most folks think horses bust out of paddocks to get away from mankind, but that's not the reason. They're looking for company. Leave two or three together, or even pen them with a billy goat they know, and most horses will be content to stay put. Cows and sheep are the same way. You can hold a hundred head together inside a couple of strands of wire. Put Mary's Little Lamb alone in a stout jail cell, and he'll bust out sure as hell. That may be why he followed her to school that day."

The boy didn't argue. Longarm tipped him a dime, led the chestnut out to the street, and mounted up. The gelding started dancing nervously and Longarm steadied him, saying, "Easy, boy. I'm tired of riding around in circles, too."

There wasn't a breath of wind near the ground, but the sky overhead looked like someone was stirring silver paint. He rode past the church and the one-room schoolhouse, noticing that both had been sandblasted clean of paint near the ground. As he rode out of town, he steered well clear of a tumbleweed squatting on the wagon trace. It wasn't moving, but the air felt like it was going to blow like hell any minute, and his mount was easily spooked. Victoria had had trouble with it all the way from Alliance.

He rode past the spot where someone had tried to bushwhack him the night before, and kept an anxious eye on the skyline. The easy way to figure it would be that the two gunslicks had missed him from up there, beaten him to town, and had been laying for him in the saloon. But easy wasn't always right, and even if Spike had nailed the hired guns, whoever had hired them was still to be acccounted for.

He rode past the colonel's spread, bracing himself

for another display of bravado. But if anyone was posted near the gate, they'd been told to leave him be.

The gelding began to steady as they got used to one another. Longarm was heavier than the girl, which discouraged toe-dancing, and he probably had an easier grip on the reins. Longarm rode with a gentle hand and didn't keep reminding his mount who the boss was. He saw that the gelding was neck-trained and responded to a rein against his neck before he felt pressure from the bit. Longarm tried guiding with his knees and shifting weight, and the horse swerved in the opposite direction from the way a lady's saddle horse was trained to.

Longarm patted him just ahead of the pommel and said, "Yep, you're an old cow pony, a mite long in the tooth and confused by being ridden as a riding stable mount. We'll get along, old timer. I can't throw a rope from this army saddle, but if we go after anybody, I'll pretend it's a cow and we'll shift our balance right together. Victoria doubtless meant welll, but she wasn't raised to be a cowboy."

A mile past the Rocking K, and on the far side of the trace, they came to the gate of Victoria's Diamond M. Like the colonel's spread, Victoria's quarter-section was fenced in, but the opening was only barred by a cattle guard of old railroad ties.

He knew cows wouldn't cross the tricky footing of sun-bleached timbers with shadowy gaps between them. Some horses were leery about cattle guards, too. But the gelding only broke stride to study a second before he sort of danced sideways through the opening and they headed on up to the house and outbuildings.

Unlike the colonel's place, Victoria had her homestead laid out on the lower slopes of the draw. No dogs barked, and nothing seemed to be moving as he rode up. Even the blades of the windmill overhead hung lifeless in the still air, as if waiting for something to happen.

He had reached the hitching post near the front door, and was getting down, when Victoria appeared on her veranda. She smiled a greeting and said her

hands were out tending the stock. Spike was worried about the funny weather, and meant to gather the herd in a timbered draw to the north.

He said, "That's good if we have a thunderstorm, but bad if we have a twister. Cows are safer away from timber if the winds get serious."

She shrugged and said she left such worries to her hands. Longarm joined her on the veranda and asked if everyone working for her was out on the range.

She said, "Yes. My cook's in town getting supplies before the town shuts down for the weekend."

Then she sniffed and frowned up at him, saying, "I didn't know Flo Walters used that damned larkspur lotion between her legs, too!"

Longarm looked innocent and asked, "Is that what that funny smell is? I noticed my room above the saloon had been sprayed with something."

"You son of a bitch. You've got it on your mustache!"

He laughed and said, "As the Lord is my witness, my mustache has been no such place as you're hinting."

Then he tried to kiss her, but she pulled away, saying, "You're not about to rub that thing against my face, you randy old goat! I wasn't *hinting* about where it's been; I *know*. You forget, we sort of got to know one another, out on the prairie."

He sighed and said, "Well, my mother taught me never to argue with a lady, so you think all the wicked thoughts you aim to. I just dropped by for a minute, anyway. I'm riding out for a look-see at those church folks to the north."

"I remember you said something about serving them with a government notice."

"I'm holding off, for now. Friday is their Sabbath, for some reason. I met their preacher last night, and he knows why I'm here, but it doesn't seem to worry him. He says he doesn't recognize the U.S. government. I suspicion he'll ignore the notice from the Land Office, even when I make it official."

"You may be right. They're funny folks out there.

But if you don't aim to run them off this morning, why are you riding out there with a storm coming?"

"I wanted to have a look at them in broad daylight. You must have heard about what happened last night at the saloon. The men your ramrod got were those same two rascals we had trouble with in Alliance."

She nodded and let her scowl fade a bit as she said, "It's all the boys have talked about since they brought Spike home last night. I rode in to see if you were all right, but they told me you'd turned in, you bastard." She sniffed and added, "While I was fretting about you, you were up there examining Flo Walters for crab lice!"

He frowned and said, "Come on, Vickie. We never exchanged eternal vows, and there's no need to talk dirty about your neighbors. What the hell, you're one handsome drummer ahead of poor Flo, ain't you?"

"Oh? What else did she tell you about me? The pig!"

"She didn't have much to say, because I told her I didn't want to hear. You wouldn't want me telling her about the details of *your* anatomy, so I'll have nothing to say to you about hers, and I'll be on my way."

She put a hand on his sleeve and said, "Don't go yet. Maybe if you took a good hot bath— We could take it together; wouldn't that be nice?"

"It sure would, honey. But let's make it another time. I want to get out there and back before the sky opens upon me and this spooky horse. It's going to rain and blow like hell this afternoon, for sure."

"Then why can't you stop by on your way back? The sound of rain on the roof is sort of romantic, and—"

"Won't your hands be back by then, stuck in the bunkhouse till it blows over?"

"Sure, but we can lock the doors, can't we?"

"I'll study on it. It's your reputation. How does Spike feel about your casual attitude to passing strangers? He's a single man, and he looks healthy."

"Pooh, he's only my hired help. You know there's

no controlling servants, once you get too familiar with them. Spike and I settled that a long time ago."

Longarm shrugged and stepped down to remount. Victoria followed him to the gelding and suddenly grinned wickedly, as she pleaded, "Forget your goddamned code. I'm curious as hell, and you know it!"

He knew what she meant, but he kept his face blank as he answered, "I said I'd study on it. If there's no trouble out at the church settlement, I'll try to stop off for a spell on my way back to Sunbonnet."

"Come on, honey. You know she asked if I was as good a lay as she is, damn it!"

He shrugged and said, "I disremember. Needless to say, if anyone asked such a fool question, they wouldn't have gotten an answer."

"Come on. I'm not really mad, I just want to know."

He swung himself into the saddle and smiled down at her. Then he said, "You're younger and better-looking, Vickie."

"That's not my question, damn it."

"I know. There's no way a gent could answer the other part without admitting to knowledge about a lady that no real gent ever admits to. I give you E for Excellence, if you really want a report card to show the other kids."

She looked pleased and said, "In that case, you'll spend the night with *me,* then, won't you?"

He clucked to his mount and turned it to ride off, without answering.

As they got back out to the wagon trace, he muttered, "Someday I'll learn to keep my big mouth shut."

No matter what he decided, one gal or the other was going to be mad as hell at him.

Chapter 7

Back when Nebraska had been a seabottom, an island had risen above the surface and been licked clean by the waves. It was still there, a granite outcrop rising above the Sand Hills all around. They called it Hunter's Rock, and it was on his government survey map. It was unfortunate for the Church of Ancestral Wisdom that they'd built their Utopia, or Zion, or whatever, near the base of the massif. The survey teams had used Hunter's Rock for a handy bench mark, and its latitude and longitude had been measured with care. The country all around was sort of given to wandering, and some of the Sand Hills weren't exactly where the map said they should be, but nothing could move solid granite rooted to the continent, and the official line of reserved open range was miles to the south.

The wagon trace looped around Hunter's Rock and wandered off to the Indian lands beyond the horizon. The Gateway, as they called it, had been built on both sides of the road. Most of the buildings were balloon frame, unpainted and ordinary-looking. On the east side, nearest Hunter's Rock, stood what looked like a lost circus tent. The top was of canvas; the sides were of unbleached muslin. Longarm figured it was the most important-looking edifice, so he headed for it.

People came to their doors or out of the big tent to stare at him as he approached. He thought they looked pretty odd, too.

Everybody was wearing Greek or Roman togas of the same thin muslin. The only way you could tell male from female was that some of the gals were built nicely, and some of the men had beards. Both sexes wore

garlands of prairie flowers in their hair or around their necks.

As he dismounted and started to tether his gelding to a post near the big tent, a willowy brunette wearing daisies in her waist-length hair came over to him and draped a chain of flowers around his neck.

Then she stood on her bare tiptoes and kissed him on the cheeek, saying, "Welcome to the Gateway. It's Friday."

He said, "I noticed. My name is Long, and I'm looking for Brother Seth or somebody in charge."

The girl said, "I am Sister Rose. Our spiritual leader is in a trance at the moment, but I'll be only too happy to take care of you. What brings you here from the Mundane?"

He said, "I came from Sunbonnet. You folks are squatting on federal property. I spoke to your Brother Seth about it already, but I don't think I got through to him."

She said, "Oh, yes, he told us he'd met a lawman with some papers or other. Catherine the Great said it would be all right."

"Uh, Catherine the Great, ma'am?"

"Empress of all the Russias. Surely you've heard of her?"

"Yep. It just took me by surprise that Brother Seth was talking to her about me. Hasn't the lady been *dead* for quite a spell?"

"Oh, she no longer dwells on this plane in her corporal body, but she's one of our guides. She's going to visit us tonight, as a matter of fact. Last Friday, Abraham Lincoln came to explain the Homestead Act to us. You see, some of our people were worried about this foolish talk about the government you work for disputing our possession of this free land, and—"

"Excuse me, ma'am," he cut in, "but I'd better talk to Brother Seth."

"I told you he was in a trance, sir. He has to prepare himself for the seance, after dark. I assure you I can tell you anything you may wish to know."

"I'm sure you can, ma'am. But unless I missed some-

thing in the papers, President Lincoln was shot about fifteen years ago, and I'm pretty sure he was a Protestant."

"We didn't invite him to this plane to discuss religion, sir. You see, the Homestead Act was his legislation, and he was quite informative about the way his original laws have been corrupted by his successors."

A girl of about twelve, wearing the same foolish outfit, came up to them with a basketful of brown, shriveled objects that resembled tiny, dried-up potatoes, and shyly held it out to them. Sister Rose thanked her and took one of the objects for herself and one for Longarm. She popped one in her mouth and handed him the other, saying, "Try it. It helps our corporal bodies to break free of mundane thoughts."

Longarm nibbled the thing gingerly, spit it out, and said flatly, "Mescal. The Apache chew these pieces of cactus to get drunk on."

Sister Rose smiled vacantly, and said, "One of our Indian guides did give them to us, as a matter of fact . . ." Her voice drifted off as she turned and started to walk away.

He caught up with Sister Rose and asked her if Brother Seth was using mescal to get set for his seance. Sister Rose looked at him like they'd never met before. Then she brightened and said, "Oh, I remember you. Weren't you here last Friday?"

"No, that was Abe Lincoln. You were going to show me around the camp."

She nodded and took him by the hand to lead him, trusting as a child. She led him into the big, empty tent and said, "If you come to the seance, tonight, remember we worship sky-clad."

"Sky-clad, ma'am?"

"You'll have to take off your clothes. The vibrations of mundane garments upset the harmony of the spheres."

"You mean you hold these meetings naked?"

"All but Brother Seth. He has to don his official robes and mystic crown."

"That figures. What are you folks, some sort of witches, or devil worshipers?"

"Heavens, I can see your mind is clouded with superstition. We don't believe in devils. There is error in the mundane universe, but everything was created by God, and God is good."

"Well, I won't argue that part. Where do these spooks appear, right here in the tent? Or does Brother Seth get them to knock and lift tables to show you they're on the premises?"

Sister Rose looked hurt and said, "You mustn't confuse us with the Fox Sisters and other stage magicians, sir. Brother Seth doesn't hold with silly tin horns and gauze ectoplasm on strings."

"He just *tells* you they're here, huh?"

"No, they come from the higher plane, to simply join us. Why don't you come to the meeting tonight and see for yourself?"

"I aim to. The last time I was at a seance, in Denver, the medium said I was a hostile presence. That's what she called me, a hostile presence. Spirits are sort of funny that way. They don't like badges."

She stared at him silently, and her eyes seemed to flicker at rapid speed. He reached out a hand and touched her shoulder gently.

The touch seemed to snap her back to attention and she said, "Oh, forgive me. My mind seems to be wandering this evening."

He said, "It's likely something you ate. And it ain't this evening. I make it about a quarter to high noon."

"Really? It seems so *dark* outside. It feels like twilight."

Longarm glanced up at the sky and nodded. He saw that the overcast was almost scraping its belly on the crest of Hunter's Rock now, and the clouds were coiling and twisting ominously overhead, even though it was sultry and a mite difficult to breathe down here at ground level. The girl turned to stare up at him as she asked, "What were we talking about?"

He said, "You were showing me about the camp, remember?"

"Oh, that's right. Just what was it you wanted to see?"

"I'm not here to pry into anything private, ma'am. But I've a good reason for wanting to take at least one good look at each and every member of your commune. Why don't you sort of introduce me once around, and I'll be on my way."

She agreed without questioning his motives, and they made a tour around the Gateway. Aside from the tabernacle, there wasn't much to see. The people seemed willing enough to say howdy as she introduced them to Longarm in passing. The women all had flowery names like Sister Daisy, Sister Jasmine, and even Sister Tuberose. The men had names like Brother Mazda or Brother Pan. When Longarm commented on this, Sister Rose explained that the men were named for what she called the Elder Deities.

None of the faces matched up with any wanted fliers. They ranged in age from a few half-grown kids, seeking the light with their parents, to a few older folks like little Sister Lilly, whom he'd met before. Half of them were wandering about full of mescal, but they seemed to be gentle, friendly souls. That was a funny thing about mescal. The border Mexicans who chewed mescal when their padre wasn't looking could be either the best friend or the meanest enemy a man could have, and mescal just seemed to underline the way they felt about you. Mescal seemed to bring inner feelings out where everyone could see them. Sister Rose had to be a sweet and gentle gal, or by now, any mean notions she'd ever had would be staring out of her pretty eyes. He decided most of the others had to be good-natured, not-too-bright, simple souls. He felt sorry for them. He knew they were wasting time and effort on a foolish notion, and he knew what a short time Fate gives anyone to make something of his or her life.

It was the waste of time and probably their life savings that bothered him most about the setup. He knew the U.S. Government had no business telling folks how to spend their own lives and money. His job was simply to run these poor, gentle fools off

federal land and let them dream their lives away somewhere else.

But what was to become of them? Many of them were young, and there were many opportunities still left in the world that scared them so. He understood why they were confused and frightened by reality. It scared *him,* sometimes. The century just starting to wind down had seen more changes than any in history. An ancient Roman waking up in 1800 wouldn't have been too surprised by the world he found. He'd have seen a stagecoach as a glorified chariot, and despite their size, a clipper ship would have seemed just a big Roman sailboat. But a lot of water had passed under the bridge since the Widow of Windsor had taken her seat on the throne. Men who'd died in the first quarter of this very century would be confused and frightened if they woke up to see steamboats, railroad trains, and ironclad battleships. Longarm himself had killed his first man with a muzzle-loader; now he packed a double-action six-shooter. He'd gone to the trouble of learning how to tap out messages in Morse code, and already they were saying folks would be chatting to one another coast-to-coast on the new telephone in a few years. He was still a young man, but he could remember when there'd been no barbed wire or railroads west of the Big Muddy. He remembered the buffalo herds, and he'd seen whole cities sprout like mushrooms, only to die as the scene kept changing.

It was small wonder these people hankered for a dream world of their own. It would be sort of nice if you could settle down somewhere where Time would stay put for a while. But things just didn't work that way, and here he was, with orders to yank them back to the real world of taxes and land titles. As he walked with Sister Rose, he asked her if Brother Seth's followers had donated all their worldly possessions to his church. He knew most of these Utopian communities worked like that, and there might be a way of getting their money back while he was bursting their bubble.

But Sister Rose said, "I don't know what you mean. I had no money to speak of when I joined."

"You must have had something. Where did you come from, and what did you do for a living, before you found a better way?"

"Oh, I worked in a cotton mill back East. Before that, of course, I lived with my parents on their farm. My father didn't have enough money to send me to school, and I thought I'd improve myself by going to work in the mill. But I hated it. It was noisy and dirty and the other girls were sort of vulgar."

"I see. You must have had some wages saved up, right?"

"No. As a matter of fact, they laid us off from the mill without paying us our last wages."

"That's illegal."

"I know. I thought it was very cruel, but there was little we could do about it. The mill owned the town. Fortunately, some girls I knew had attended some meetings of the Church, and I was able to join just as my funds were running out. Since then, I've learned that money has no meaning on a higher plane."

He frowned and asked, "They took you in flat broke? I know better than to argue economics with you, but whether money means anything to you or not, *somebody* had to pay your way out here. What do you folks live on?"

"Oh, we eat together in our communal mess. Would you like to see our kitchen facilities?"

"Not unless there's someone there I haven't met. Let's stick to the point. If none of you followers have been contributing to the upkeep of this place, who's paying the bills?"

"Bills? Whatever do you mean? I told you we don't bother with such trifles as mere money."

"Honey, even the Indians use money out here these days! I can see you're not wearing duds from Paris, and those flowers in your hair are free for the picking. You're not paying range fees on this land you've squatted on, and it's bothering the Land Office some. But, leaving rent and clothing aside, I find it hard to believe your food and all this lumber just dropped from the sky. You're not farming the land. You're not

making silverware or anything else to sell. Somebody, somewhere, is funding this outfit."

She shrugged and said, "I suppose you're right, now that I think about it. Brother Seth does all our thinking for us."

"I suspicioned as much, and you tell me he's in a trance. Before I leave, I'd sort of like a word with him."

"I'll take you to him, but I don't think he'll talk to you. Sometimes Brother Seth sits all day in meditation."

She took him by the hand again, and led him to a cabin. He noticed she didn't knock as she opened the door. The interior was divided into four rooms. They found Brother Seth in one of them, sitting crosslegged on the floor, in the middle of a chalked circle. He was wearing a red velvet robe and looked sort of like a Chinese Buddha sitting there, with his eyes closed and talking to himself.

Sister Rose said, "This stranger from the mundane plane asked to see you, O Guru."

Brother Seth said something that sounded like "Ohmmm."

She smiled sweetly up at Longarm and explained, "He's not with us. All he's aware of at the moment is his mantra."

Longarm hunkered down on his heels and stared hard into the soft, fat face. He said, "Howdy, Brother Seth. It's me, Custis Long. You gave me a lift last night, remember?"

Brother Seth said, "Ohmmm."

He was either full of mescal or a damned good actor. Either way, Longarm saw he wasn't about to get a sensible word from him. As the lawman squatted there, staring hard, it came to him why that picture of Oscar Wilde had seemed so familiar. Brother Seth didn't look like the English poet, exactly, but they both had the same out-of-this-world expression, and neither looked like he'd quite made up his mind whether he was a boy or a girl. Brother Seth's flabby jowls were

as smooth as a baby's. If he shaved at all, he had one hell of a razor.

His black, wavy hair was dusted with gray threads, but his unlined face was ageless as well as sexless. Professor Bertillon would have had a chore measuring Brother Seth's bone structure. You couldn't *see* a bone in that pudding face of his.

There was a sudden crash of thunder. Longarm flinched, but the fat man on the floor never moved a muscle, if he had any. Longarm was braced for the sound of hail or rain on the roof, but there wasn't any. He got up and went over to a window.

The ground outside was dry and dusty as ever, and he muttered, "Dry lightning. That's a bad sign in these parts."

Turning back to Brother Seth and Sister Rose, he said, "I'd take that big tent down, if I were you folks. That big sky outside looks mighty mean."

But Brother Seth kept saying, "Ohmm," and Sister Rose was floating out of the room. He decided she made more sense than the fat man on the floor, so he followed her.

She led him to a room with a brass bedstead and some box-and-barrel furniture, and before he could say anything, she'd unfastened her gauzy toga and let it fall to the floor. She was still wearing flowers, but that was all.

He said, "I know the weather's a mite sultry, ma'am, but do you usually walk about stark naked in broad daylight?"

She said, "I'm feeling sort of woozy and I mean to take a nap. Would you like to join me?"

He ran his eyes over her perfect torso and perky breasts as he replied, "Anyone but a blind man would, ma'am. But there's no door between us and Brother Seth, and . . . "

"He doesn't mind. He says the pleasures of our earthly forms hold no meaning in the Grand Design. Have you read the works of the Woodhull sisters or Annie Besant, sir?"

It sounded silly to be called "sir," considering, but

he said, "No, but those ladies seem to keep getting arrested. Are we talking about free love or birth control? It's sort of hard to keep up."

Sister Rose sat on the bed and stretched out sensuously as she said, "Well, one must be practical about some things, even on this plane. Brother Seth says free love is all right, as long as you don't get in trouble."

"I see. How many of you free spirits has he been, uh, *friendly* with?"

"Oh, Brother Seth is above such feelings. He's only involved in theophysical matters. He very seldom eats or drinks, either. He says his earthly form doesn't suffer from temptations."

She closed her eyes and reclined limply, as if leaving the next move to him. Longarm caught his hand reaching for the buttons of his vest, then told it to behave. He didn't know about Brother Seth, but his physical form was tempted as hell. The girl was lovely, and if she wasn't asking for it, she obviously didn't give a damn.

That was the part that made him hesitate. His carnal desires told him he was playing the fool. Any number of the others had probably had her. She'd just *said* she practiced birth control and, Jesus, she looked pretty lying there, a healthy woman of legal age and no sense of shame or hesitation. Nine men out of ten would be on top of her by now.

But Longarm didn't think like nine out of ten men. He didn't cheat at cards against nonprofessionals, he didn't sneak a drink from another man's bottle, and he didn't molest children.

That's what she was, despite her years. A lost, innocent child, living in some crazy dream.

He stepped over to the bed, pressed a finger to his lips, and touched her lightly on the forehead with it, saying, "I'll be heading back to Sunbonnet now. If I'm not carried off by a twister or shot by this evening, I may come back to meet the Empress of Russia."

She didn't answer. He could tell by the gentle rise and fall of her nipples that she was unconscious or

asleep. He sighed and thought to himself, *Some night when you're all alone in some tank-town hotel, old son, you're going to remember this and kick yourself in the ass.*

Then he shrugged and turned away to leave her there, dreaming about a nice new world where nobody pestered you with new inventions, or asked to see the deed to your property.

He went out, nodded to a couple strolling arm in arm under the glowering sky, and got his horse. He mounted up and rode out. Nobody paid him any attention.

He was filled with doubts as he headed back to town. It seemed a shame he couldn't just leave them there in their tiny Utopia. He saw, now, why everyone in these parts considered them crazy, but didn't seem to mind their being there. They weren't taking up much room, and they weren't bothering anyone. Who could have complained about them to the Land Office?

More importantly, how had they gotten there, and who'd paid for it? He'd counted over thirty head of wispy dreamers in muslin drapery, and he knew what it cost to feed that many, even on rough fare. No mescal cacti grew this far north, so their Indian dope had to cost *something,* if it was only freight charges. It sure was spooky. Longarm didn't believe in ghosts, so he doubted they were getting much financial help from Catherine the Great or Abe Lincoln. Unless Brother Seth was independently wealthy, some earthly hand was giving him an allowance.

Longarm played a fair hand at chess, and he'd figured out some tricky games in his time. But try as he might, he couldn't grasp one sensible suspicion about this game, whatever it was. The commune didn't seem to be bothering anyone or hiding anything from anyone. But something was going on, and he was starting to feel used. He knew someone had gone to the trouble of getting him out here on this crazy job, and somebody else kept shooting at him to keep him from doing it. He was starting to feel like a pawn between two

invisible master players, and he'd just missed being jumped a couple of times.

The gelding was nervous, too. You could feel the tension in the still air, but the sky held back whatever it was planning. A mile from the Gateway, there was another terrible crash of dry lightning. The horse bucked, got the bit between his teeth, and started crow-hopping in fright.

Longarm rode with the mindless bucking, saying, "Easy, pard. If I wanted to ride a merry-go-round, I'd have let you know in advance."

The conversation seemed to calm the spooked gelding, and he settled for a flat run toward Sunbonnet and the company of his kind in the livery. Longarm shifted his weight and swerved him uphill off the wagon trace. The grade was steep enough to make most horses restudy the notion of running flat out. Longarm was up to a long run, but he didn't want the horse to exhaust himself before they got to Sunbonnet. He believed in having some reserve energy under him, in case it might be needed for something important.

They sailed up the grassy sand hill toward the swirling overcast, and by the time they had reached the top, the gelding's flanks were sweating and Longarm had the bit back. He reined in on the crest and said, "I thank you for the entertaining diversion, old son. But now that you've gotten that out of your system, let's settle down, huh? You can see there's nothing important to look at up here."

Then, as he swept his eyes around the horizon, he whistled softly and a frown pulled his eyebrows together under the tugged-down brim of his Stetson.

Far to the southwest, a black funnel hung from the dark sky, dragging across the Sand Hills like a dirty dishrag. The twister was at least ten miles away and not headed anywhere important. He'd ridden across the country over there, coming in, and he knew it was empty. He watched, and saw that the twister was moving due north. It posed no threat to the commune he'd just left. It figured to blow itself out before it got to the Crow Reservation, north of the state line.

But he knew the things came in bunches, and he wondered if he should ride back and warn somebody at the Gateway. The problem was, there didn't seem to be anyone back there who'd *listen* to a warning.

He decided not to waste his time talking to people full of mescal. If it hit them, it hit them. It wasn't as if there was much anyone could do about the damned things, warned or not. The only thing anyone could do was sidestep. He'd been chased by twisters before, and knew a mounted man could save himself by riding at right angles to the funnel's path.

He looked around, saw there were no other tornadoes in view, and told the gelding, "Let's go, old son. We're asking for a lightning bolt up here."

He rode along the ridge, and when it petered out, he got the gelding back to the wagon trace. He considered Victoria's kind offer as they passed her spread, but he saw a couple of hands boarding up her windows, so he just waved to them and rode on.

He passed Colonel Claymore's gate, and since the horse was still spooked and the distance was not great, he let the animal run and they entered Sunbonnet at a lope. He saw a crowd in the street in front of Flo's saloon.

As he rode toward them, Pop came to meet him, calling out, "I've been looking all over for you! It's awful!"

Longarm reined in and dismounted as he asked, "What's awful, Pop? What's going on, here?"

"They tried for you again! Put a bullet right through your window shade! We found the spent shell over in the shelterbelt, but there was no other sign worth mention. Flo must have moved your shade as she was cleaning, and—"

But Longarm wasn't listening. He dropped the reins, hoping the gelding would either stay put or trot over to the livery. Longarm ran up the steps and through the saloon's batwings. Inside, he found the swamper and more curiosity-seekers staring at the ceiling.

The old cleaning man said, "The bartender's topside with Flo and the doc."

Longarm glanced up. There was a bloodstain on the ceiling; that was what everyone was staring up at.

He took the stairs two at a time, and raced through the open door of his room. Inside, he found three men kneeling over the body stretched on the floorboards. The doctor had torn Flo's pathetic mail-order finery open, and her breasts were exposed. There was a gaping, bloody wound just over Flo's left nipple.

The sawbones looked up and sighed heavily, then said, "There was nothing I could do, Deputy. It looks like the entry wound was in her back. The bullet came out here and buried itself in the wall over there, above the bed."

The bartender said, "I guess I heard the shot, but I thought it was thunder. I don't know how long it was before we noticed the blood dripping from the ceiling down below."

Longarm went to the window. The sash had been up, so no glass had been broken. There was a bullet hole in the center of the shade.

He raised it and stared out. There was a gap between the frame buildings across the way, and he could see clear to the cottonwood shelterbelt on the west edge of town. There was no point in going over there, he knew. If there'd been any footprints under the trees to begin with, by now the townies had obliterated them by milling about.

Pop came in to join them, having taken a bit more time than Longarm in getting up the stairs. As Longarm turned from the window with a terrible, cold expression in his gunmetal-blue eyes, the old man held out a spent rifle cartridge and said, "This is all we found. Looks like a .30-30, and you can smell it was fired today. It's a hell of a range, but they might have had a scope sight, don't you reckon?"

Longarm took the shell and read the engraving on the base, around the cap. He said, "Remington .30-30. DuPont smokeless powder. Yeah, one sharp whipcrack, no smoke. All right, how many folks do you know around here who own a .30-30 deer rifle, Pop?"

"Hell, son, there's a mess of them. Colonel Clay-

more has a fancy English rifle with a scope sight. I think it's a .30-30. But fair is fair; I've seen a dozen such rifles hanging from saddles or on folks' walls."

Longarm had expected that answer. He moved over to the wall, took out his jackknife, and started digging for the slug behind the wallpaper.

The townie with the doctor said, "As far as we can put it together, Flo must have moved the shade as she was up here doing the rooms. Somebody laying for you over there must have seen it, thought it was you in your room, and let fly as Flo turned from the window. The only good part is that she must not have ever known what hit her."

Longarm didn't answer. People always said dumb things like that. He could see from the stains on the floor that Flo had been knocked on her face by the shot, and had rolled over at least twice in agony. Most people lived a minute or two, even shot through the heart, and stopped bleeding after they were dead. Flo had lived long enough to bleed like a stuck pig.

Had she called out in her agony? Had she maybe called *his* name, and had she blamed him, in those awful seconds before death claimed her? Had she wondered why a friendly, harmless gal like her had to die in the place of a grown man who might have known better?

He got the slug out, saw that it was a shapeless mass of lead, and closed his fist tightly around it. Then he drove the fist into the wall hard enough to leave a dent. He didn't think the dead woman at his feet would mind, but it didn't do her any good, either.

He said, "I want her buried right, with plenty of flowers and a handsome marker. I'm paying for it."

Pop said, "Hell, Longarm, Sunbonnet can take care of its own."

But Longarm said, "I want to pay for it anyway. Before I leave this town, some son of a bitch will pay for what he did, the hard way."

"I know how you feel, son. If any of us get the rascal, he's going to do some hollering before we finish him."

The townie said, "We'll tar and feather the bastard before we hang him, and we'll hang him *slow*."

Longarm turned away and left the room. They always said *that*, too. But, somehow, the catching was left to lawmen. As he went downstairs, he was trying to decide whether dying slow, gutshot, hurt worse than waiting a month or so on death row. He'd handled it both ways in his time, but it never seemed to help. No matter what you did to a killer, their victims never said thank you. They just stayed dead.

He went to the telegraph office, where the clerk said, "I heard what happened. You have a couple of messages waiting for you."

Longarm took the two telegrams and read them quickly. One was from his home office, asking him what was taking him so long to report his job done. The other was from the Chicago police:

SUSPECTS ANSWERING DESCRIPTION BENDER WOMEN RELEASED STOP BOTH PRODUCED DOCUMENTATION PROVING NOT IN KANSAS TIME OF KILLINGS STOP GIRL A PERFECT LIKENESS KATE BENDER BUT WELL KNOWN ACTRESS STOP BOOKING AGENT CONFIRMS SHE WAS PLAYING EVA IN UNCLE TOMS CABIN AT TIME OF BENDER MURDERS

He shrugged and threw the wire in the wastebasket. That was that. An actress playing the part of Little Eva would have been younger than Kate Bender when they were both making their marks in the world. It was surprising nobody had noticed the resemblance before, if the girl in Chicago had been on the stage all this time. Maybe she wasn't such a well-known actress after all, but the Chicago police seemed to be doing their homework, and he had no further suggestions. He was pretty sure the Benders, or someone who looked like them, were closer than Chicago. Deputy Harcourt hadn't been gunned by anyone in Chicago.

But if Harcourt had spotted Kate Bender and her

brother, where the hell *were* they? He was sure he'd seen everyone in and about Sunbonnet by now. The others would have told him if there were any strangers within miles, and the town was surrounded by open country, with no cover at all. Somehow, it was just like it had been down in Kansas, with everybody on the prod and looking for them in wide-open country, and nobody able to see them.

Of course, only Kate had been photographed, and a woman's looks can change in eight years. But that wouldn't work; Deputy Harcourt had wired that he'd seen her and a man answering to her brother's description. Harcourt had been a green hand. Whoever he'd seen *had* to have looked like the old wanted posters said the Benders did. Harcourt had never been in Kansas. He wouldn't have *noticed* his suspects unless they were a close match.

Longarm took a pencil stub and began to compose a wire to Marshal Vail, as a funny little bell rang behind the counter. He glanced up and saw the clerk talking on his homemade telephone. Longarm didn't try to follow the one-sided conversation. He knew it was the clerk's wife, over at their house, even before he heard the man call someone "honey."

Longarm wrote: SQUATTERS INFORMED OF OUR DISPLEASURE STOP AM NOW INVESTIGATING ATTEMPTED MURDER OF U S FEDERAL OFFICER STOP WILL REPORT IN ONCE I SOLVE SAME

The clerk hung up and said sheepishly, "That was the little woman. She's all cut up about what happened to old Flo. You see, she snubbed Flo in the street the other day, and now she's wondering if it would look funny if we sent flowers."

Longarm replied, "I'm sure Flo would be pleased. She was a friendly, forgiving gal. There's no hurry about your sending this. I won't mind if he finds it on his desk on Monday morning."

The clerk nodded as he scanned the message. He said, "I noticed he wanted you back. Who do you aim to arrest for Flo's murder?"

"The one who killed her, of course."

"I never went to no university, Deputy, but I had that part figured out already. Don't you have any idea who it was?"

"Hell, ideas are *all* I have. I just can't narrow it down to anyone I've seen in Sunbonnet."

A suddent thought hit him and he asked, "Will you and your wife both be coming to Flo's burial?"

"I reckon so. It'd be disrespectful not to attend the church services, even if the lady was a saloonkeeper."

"That's the way I see it. Your little woman sounds like a decent gal. Have you two been married long?"

The clerk thought and said, "Seven years, come September. I know it sounds sort of sissy to say it to another man, but we've been happy as hell. My wife's a pretty, bitty thing with a mop of golden curls and big blue eyes a man would like to drown in. I've never looked at another woman since we married up, and she don't look a day older. You are talking to one lucky cuss, and I'm not ashamed to admit it."

Longarm said, "I'd say you have little to be ashamed of. I sort of envy you. You say she's a *little* gal?"

"Yep. Five foot two, and passing for sweet sixteen. Would you like to meet her? I'll warn you in advance, I ain't worried, good-looking as you may be. We're still on our honeymoon after seven years, and I'd trust her alone with John Drew!"

Longarm smiled and said, "That's not what I had in mind."

The telegrapher grinned boyishly. "You'll have to admit, you asked some pretty funny questions. Jesus H. Christ! I know why you asked me to describe my woman!"

He laughed and added, "Wait till I tell her the law suspected her of being Kate Bender! She'll fall down laughing at you. No offense."

Longarm said, "That's all right. Someone else around here's been laughing at me meaner, and it's getting tedious as hell."

Chapter 8

By evening, they had Flo cleaned up and lying in state at the church. The air still hung warm and humid, like a big cat holding its breath above a mouse hole.

Longarm had placed a bunch of violets in the waxy, crossed hands of the little stranger lying in the coffin at the church. Someone had made the usual remark about how natural and peaceful Flo looked, but she hadn't even looked like Flo to him—not the Flo he remembered, anyway.

He thought about that as he rode out of town in the gathering dusk. He'd never really gotten to know her. They'd made love in the dark in the room she'd died in, and he'd probably added things to her face while kissing it. Alive and serving beer, he hadn't noticed her. Dead in the church, her face had been just negatively pretty. There'd been nothing wrong with it, but nothing to remember. Somehow, when he thought of Flo in his arms, he supplied her with a smile he'd never really seen, and he put warm laughter in her eyes. The blank face in the coffin didn't go with the warm, friendly, decent lady he'd always remember.

So he wasn't going to avenge that mask in the church. He was going to make someone pay for what they'd done to the *soul* he'd made love to.

The horse didn't like the idea of trotting under that awful-looking sky again, and Longarm had more trouble with him. He'd considered taking the pack critter, but it wasn't trained as a saddle mount, and Longarm didn't have time to educate it. He told the chestnut, "I know it's late and you're tired, pard, but we're going anyway. You keep fighting me, and it's just going to take longer."

Something moved on the wagon trace ahead, and the gelding shied. Longarm steadied him and said, "Easy, boy. It's just a tumbleweed."

The air down here was starting to move a bit. It was about time. He looked around, but there was little to see down here between the sand hills. A twister could be tearing along the bottom of the next draw over, for all he knew. It was getting late for twisters, though. They usually formed when the sun was shining, though Longarm had no idea why.

He rode to the Gateway and saw that they'd hung paper Chinese lanterns here and there. One was over an entrance to the tabernacle tent, so he rode up to it, dismounted, and tethered his horse.

A pair of folks in nothing but flowers passed him with a friendly nod, and he followed the naked disciples into the tent.

He'd been told they met like that, but it still surprised him to see so many people sitting around in their birthday suits. It was pretty dark inside, and they were sitting on the dry grass floor. He noticed that more than one of the gals was built nicely, but some of them looked awful in the nude, and most of the bearded men looked just plain silly.

A voice asked gently, "Why are you wearing clothes, brother?"

It was Sister Rose. She was as naked as the last time he'd seen her, but she'd changed the flowers in her hair. She said, "Oh, I remember you. Did we make love earlier today? I'm afraid I fell asleep."

He said, "No harm done. You invited me back to see the show, remember?"

She nodded. "But you'll have to sit in the back row if you intend to stay dressed in your worldly tatters. I'll stay with you and explain, back here, where we won't distract anyone."

She led him to a spot near a tent pole, and they sat down together.

He felt awkward, but he wasn't about to sit there wearing nothing but a badge and a gunbelt.

The tent was already crowded by now, but others

kept coming in to sit or squat around and in front of them. He noticed a pretty little girl, and turned his eyes away. It didn't seem right to stare at naked kids just starting to bud like that.

As in a more normal congregation, there was a lot of shifting and apparent delay before Brother Seth waddled in, wearing yet another robe. This one was dark blue, with what looked to Longarm like Masonic emblems all over it in tarnished gilt thread. He wondered if they'd gotten it from a costume shop or stolen it from a real Mason.

Longarm expected a long-winded sermon to warm the crowd up before the plate was passed. But Brother Seth got right to the point. He ordered the lights doused, and as the tent was plunged into darkness, Brother Seth started speaking in tongues. Longarm had been in some unusual churches in the past, so he knew some sects held with praying in what sounded like sheer gibberish. None of the congregation joined in, and he'd seen, when the lights had been burning, how many of them wore the peculiar look of someone high on mescal. He sat there holding hands with the pretty naked lady at his side, not really expecting much. With his followers chewing mescal and all excited by being crowded together naked, Brother Seth could have told them there was an elephant on his shoulder and nobody would have argued. It looked like it was going to be a pretty dull show, to anyone half sober. He'd never understood how sane men and women managed to persuade themselves at seances. He supposed it was because they *needed* to believe in ghosts and a life beyond the grave. What a comfort it would be, in his own line of work, to think such thoughts. It wouldn't be so rough to face an owlhoot with the drop on you if you thought it didn't *count* when someone shot you. He didn't know if coming back to toot horns and rap on tables was his cup of tea, but it sure beat just *lying* there.

Brother Seth switched to something like English, and seemed to be invoking the late Empress of all the Russias, for some reason. Longarm noticed a little

patch of light down at the far end of the tent, and assumed that someone had lit a penny candle. It was hard to judge distance in the dark, but the light kept growing until it was about the size and shape of a person, and a little, tinny voice called out, "I am trying to get through to you, my children, but it's so far, so very far."

Longarm muttered, "Yeah, all the way from Russia, right?"

But Sister Rose squeezed his hand and said, Hush!"

Then, apparently to distract him, she put his hand between her thighs and held it there, distracting him for sure.

He left his hand where it was, trying not to think too much about the soft hair against his fingertips as he watched the dim, flickering light. He didn't know whether Sister Rose was full of mescal and free love or simply playing gypsy tricks on him, but he didn't aim to miss anything while exploring her.

The voice sounded far away indeed as it asked, "What need have you of me, tonight?"

Brother Seth said they were worried about the Land Office evicting them, which was the first sensible thing Longarm had heard so far.

The reedy voice said, "You are dwelling, as commanded, in the aura of a High Place. You must not leave Hunter's Rock. We on the higher planes know of your problems with worldly men. Trust us to take care of you. We have powers undreamed of by any corporal government."

There was a sigh of relief from the unseen congregation, and Sister Rose snuggled up to his hand, sort of wagging her tail as Longarm thought, *Aw, hell,* and started fingering her. This whole mess was pathetic, and would have been downright boring, had he not been given something interesting to do.

He saw that the shifting blur of light was changing, and as he was still wondering how Brother Seth managed his second voice like that, he saw features starting to form around the head, or at least the top, of the apparition. From where he was sitting, it looked like

some woman was standing near the source of the light with more of that gauzy muslin over her head. She seemed to be letting it slip away a layer at a time, and he wondered if she'd be naked, when she got down to the seventh veil.

The late Catherine the Great kept telling them just how great she was, as her features got clearer and clearer. And then, there she was, smiling out from the Great Beyond at them all, and visible enough to make out every feature. Only that wasn't Catherine the Great across the tent.

It was Kate Bender.

She seemed to be looking right at Longarm as she said, in that eerie voice, "I must leave you now, my children. There is an unbeliever among us, I can see."

The light flicked out as Longarm leaped to his feet and headed her way, tripping over people in the dark. He ran into a tent pole, cursed, and struck a match. Brother Seth was staring at him slack-jawed, and naked people were fussing at him from every side. But as the match went out, he knew the tall woman in the dark dress was no longer there. She'd slipped out, somehow. But that was no big mystery; the goddamned walls were made of thin muslin. He didn't know where the nearest doorway was, so he didn't bother looking. He just ran in the general direction of where he'd last seen Kate Bender, and bulled on through, ripping things apart.

It was pretty dark outside, but light enough to make out any human-sized objects in motion. There didn't seem to be any. Everyone was still inside the tent, yelling like hell.

Gun in hand, Longarm ran once around the tent, peering sharply in every direction. It was impossible. There was nobody out here, and he was sure the woman he'd seen wasn't still inside.

He stopped suddenly, and listened. There it was again. A *slithery* sound, as if someone were moving across the dry grass!

Longarm moved toward the sound, not seeing a damned thing. Then, suddenly, there was a tremendous

flash of lightning, and it started to rain. But not before he'd seen, in the chalk-white flash that had illuminated everything for a mile in every direction, that he was alone!

He turned toward the tent as the rain lashed down, soaking him to the skin within seconds. Someone had lit a lamp inside, and he trotted over, not only to dry out but to have another look at everyone in the god-damned tent!

He came through the opening, scowling and still holding his gun. Brother Seth had recovered enough to demand, "What was the meaning of that outburst? You drove our friend away!"

Longarm said, "Yeah," as he ran his eyes over the faces staring at him. None of them were even close. He pointed his muzzle at the preacher-medium and said, "Let's go. Frog-march. Double-time."

"Go? Go where? You have no reason to arrest me, friend!"

"The hell you say. I want a word alone with you over at your cabin, and I want it now. How do you like the charge of harboring a fugitive, for openers?"

Brother Seth shrugged and started to move out ahead of Longarm as he told the others, "Stay here, dear hearts. This young man and I have a matter to discuss. He seems very confused."

Longarm didn't answer. He waited until he had the fat man in the nearby cabin before he turned up the oil lamp and said, "All right, shuck out of those duds. I want you stripped to the buff, and I want it two minutes ago."

"I didn't get very wet just now, friend."

"I'm not undressing you to keep you from catching cold. Take off those duds or I'll shoot you and peel you like a deer."

Brother Seth looked like he was about to burst into tears as he said, "I can't. You'll see."

"That's the general idea. I'm not bluffing, mister. I mean to see you naked in the next three minutes, alive or dead; the choice is yours. I haven't time to palaver with you anymore."

Brother Seth sobbed, unfastened the robe, and let it fall. He hadn't been wearing anything under it, and the sight that met Longarm's gaze was obscene. The man weighed at least three hundred pounds, and it hung on him in white, watery folds. His genitals seemed strangely withered.

Longarm said, "You can get dressed again. What happened to you?"

Brother Seth said, "I was emasculated at the Battle of Cold Harbor. You may find this hard to believe, but I was young and handsome then."

"I'll buy that. I've seen what castration does to a steer. Would it be an educated guess to assume you got interested in the spirit world about then?"

"Well, there was this chap in my hospital ward who was interested in theophysics, and—"

"Never mind. I've got your life since you got wounded figured out. Where the hell did Kate Bender go, just now?"

"Kate Bender? I don't know who you're talking about. We were communing with Catherine the Great when—"

"Aw, shit, the only Catherine there was Catherine—Kate—Bender. She's wanted for a dozen murders. Make it thirteen, as of this afternoon."

"I assure you Her Majesty never mentioned anything about a murder to *me!*"

Longarm shot him a long, hard look before he lowered the muzzle of his sixgun and said, "You're either crazy-stupid or the best poker bluff I've met in a while. Let's start with crazy-stupid. Are you trying to tell me the woman I just saw out there has been telling you she was the dead queen of Russia?"

"Of course. Didn't you recognize her?"

"I recognized her, all right. Along with helping her folks kill lonely travelers, Kate Bender was known to be a spirit medium and a fair magician. The spook she introduced as Abe Lincoln wasn't a tall, dark man, sort of husky across the shoulders, was he?"

"Of course he was. Everyone knows President Lin-

coln was tall and dark. He worked as a rail-splitter in his youth."

"The jasper I'm after swings a mean sledge hammer, and likes to work with thin cloth walls. When did you first meet up with these spooks?"

"Oh, I didn't know how to *materialize* spirits until quite recently. You've no idea how thrilled I was when they started appearing at my seances."

"You mean, before that, it was possession, funny noises, nothing really there?"

"I assure you, the spirits are always there."

"Never mind. Give me some times and places. Better yet, tell me where you get the money to run this freak show."

Brother Seth finished dressing as he sighed and said, "I can see you don't believe me, but your questions can be answered in one breath. It was shortly after Her Majesty began to appear to us, about eighteen months ago, in Ohio, that she made funds available to me. She said she had a little money in America when she died. Diplomatic funds, I think she called them."

"Back up. You got a check or a bank draft from *Catherine the Great*?"

"Of course not. Who'd have cashed them? Her Majesty simply somehow transferred a few thousand dollars to my own modest bank account. From time to time, I seem to find *more* there. I've no idea how the spirits manage these things."

"I do. Cash deposit by someone saying he's you. Never mind that easy stuff. After Catherine the Great took you under her wing, she told you to come out here to Sunbonnet, right?"

"The spirits never mentioned Sunbonnet. It's the High Place, Hunter's Rock. You see, certain nodal points between universes—"

"Shut up. I see how Kate Bender got you lunatics to come out here from Ohio, but I can't see why, and while you're blathering, she's getting a damned good lead on me. Whether you're in on it or just dumb, I've got enough to put you out of business and in jail

for maybe twenty years, so I want you to study my next question before you answer it. Where in hell are they headed?"

Brother Seth looked once more as if he were about to cry, but he managed to control himself as he said, "We obviously don't have the same understanding of time and space, friend. I believe our guides and mentors return to another plane. You obviously think they're still on this corporal earth."

"That's for damned sure. I don't think they've been staying in the town, and it's raining cats and dogs out there right now. I don't know how they keep the hands from jawing about it in Sunbonnet, but they're either staying on some out-of-town spread or hiding in a hole in the ground. Are there any caves in that big pile of rock yonder?"

"Hunter's Rock? I don't think so. Some of our younger members have climbed to the top. They say there's a sort of natural bowl in the boulders at the summit, but it seems to be solid granite."

"Hmm, non-ferrous metal veins are found in granite, too. But that won't work. If anyone found an ore lode on government land, they'd want to work it quietly. They wouldn't start a zoo nearby to attract attention."

He gave the fat man a thoughtful look and added, "Yeah, somebody sure wanted the U.S. Government to take another look at Hunter's Rock. If it's stopped raining by sunup, I'll just climb up there and do that very thing."

Brother Seth said, "You're welcome to spend the night with us, assuming I'm not under arrest."

Longarm said, "Mister, I aim to spend the night where I last saw Kate Bender, whether I'm welcome or not. As to who's arrested or not, I ain't made up my mind. You're either lying through your teeth or I owe you some apologies. We'll decide which, later."

The fat man sighed and said, "I understand. Would you like to sleep here in Sister Rose's bed? I think she likes you."

"I know. How does that square with your religious ideals, Brother Seth?"

The fat man smiled bitterly, and said, "As you know, such matters no longer seem important to me. We're involved with higher values."

"I've heard all that before, and I don't mean to hear it again, if I can help it. Where's Rose now?"

"I assume she's in the tent with the others, frightened out of her wits. A few moments ago, we told them all to stay there, and you were waving a gun around, remember?"

"Right. You can go and tell them it's bedtime, then. Send Rose to me."

"It's Sister Rose. And aren't you being a little brutal, friend?"

"Yeah. I was testing. You've got some feelings left, and they do you credit. I do want a word with Sister Rose—but don't worry, she'll be safe with me."

Brother Seth smiled wistfully, and said, "Perhaps. But will you be safe with Sister Rose?"

Then he left to soothe his frightened flock.

Longarm went into the girl's dark bedroom and peered out the window. The rain had stopped as quickly as it had started, and the wind had died again. If he'd been anywhere but the Sand Hills, he'd have considered looking for tracks, but there wasn't any mud for miles, and the thirsty dunes would suck the surface dry in no time, after such a short downpour. He knew that, by morning any tracks would be just dimples in dry sand, and somehow, he had an odd feeling that the woman he'd just seen in the tent had *left* no tracks.

He didn't think he'd seen a ghost. Kate Bender was a clever sleight-of-hand artist, not a spook. She'd done the same thing when she was a younger gal in Kansas. She'd just vanished.

Sister Rose came in, naked but dry, and said, "You're soaking wet. Why don't you take off your clothes?"

"I'd like to. Let me look at you, honey. Are you still full of mescal?"

"Oh, I haven't chewed any for hours. They made me sick earlier today, remember?"

"Right. You're sober and I don't want to stay in

your room. I have a reason for letting the others think I might be bedded down in here, if you take my meaning."

"You want to watch from somewhere else, and see if anyone tries to creep up on us."

It was a statement rather than a question, and Longarm had just decided she wasn't as dumb as he'd thought, when she spoiled it by adding, "I have no jealous lover, and Catherine the Great certainly isn't about to bother you. But we could sleep in the tabernacle, if you like. Nobody ever goes in there at night. I'll gather some bedding."

"I've a bedroll on my mount, if he hasn't run off to Canada by now."

"Oh, he's in the tent already. I led him in and tied him to a pole to dry out."

"Good. If the others know a horse is tied in there, they'll avoid going near it. Horses are better than dogs when it comes to spooking at strange noises in the night."

He saw that she was willing and ready. He also considered the danger to her if someone made another grim mistake about who might be in a certain room. But he had to say, "About where my hand wandered, before."

"It didn't wander, I put it there. What's the matter with you? Don't you like me?"

"That's the part that gets in my way. I *do* like you, kitten. The trouble with liking and respecting a gal is that it makes it tough to play by sensible rules."

She stepped over to him, leaned her nude body against his wet clothes, and wrapped her arms around him as she asked, "What do you call sensible rules, sir? Are you one of those terrible love-'em-and-leave-'em rascals that mothers warn their daughters about?"

"Uh, sort of. You see, I have a dangerous job, and a man like me has to consider the fix he might leave a wife in, if she was depending on him to get home alive for supper."

"That's the trouble with you decent men. Free love

is so dreary with a rascal, but the men an emancipated woman *wants* to make love to all run away, no doubt to spare her feelings."

Longarm kissed her and she thrust herself firmly against him, moving her pelvis against the scratchy, damp tweed of his trousers.

It was raining again, but Longarm didn't care. He and Sister Rose had a dim but unobstructed view of the cabin she shared with Brother Seth. The lawman's guns were in reach near the head of his bedroll. His wet duds were hanging on a line Sister Rose had improvised between two side poles. At the far end, the tethered horse dozed on his feet, now that he'd gotten used to them. Like Brother Seth, he'd been castrated while young, so he wasn't disturbed, as a stud or a mare in heat might have been, by the musky smell of other critters mating.

He was glad he hadn't taken advantage of Sister Rose earlier. She was put together in a way that would have made her better than most, even knocked out. Awake and trying to warm his chilled flesh for him, she was damned near too much for him. By the time they'd finished the first time, it was too warm for comfort in the bedroll. So Longarm threw the top tarp and blanket off.

She said, "We're going to catch consumption. It sounds like it's starting to hail out there."

"I don't care if it comes down fire and salt, honey. If you want me to keep going, I've got to let my skin breathe."

But she insisted he was going to take a chill, and they compromised when she said, "I'll just get on top and be your love-blanket!"

He didn't argue and she got on top. He decided she was more of a sponge than a blanket. She couldn't seem to get enough, and she moved her young, boyish hips like she wanted it all. Longarm lay spread-eagled and bemused, wondering why he wasn't enjoying it more.

It wasn't as if he was impotent, and it wasn't as if

she wasn't great. He was getting a fantastic lay, and he knew it. He wanted more. But he felt so damned . . . *guilty?*

That was probably it, he decided. He'd always laughed at men who came home from the parlor house with flowers and a shit-eating grin for the little woman. He sure didn't owe anything to randy old Victoria, and he knew he'd have laughed at the notion that he was cheating on Flo, if she had still been alive. Hell, he didn't owe her any exclusive rights, dead. It still hurt to think of her in that pine box back in Sunbonnet, but mooning over it like Sir Galahad wasn't going to help her now. No matter how you lost a gal, there was only one cure for the hole it burned in you.

Longarm had a lonely job, and lived by a lonely code. So he'd learned, the hard way, about the ways a man's heart survives loss. It didn't matter if he had to turn his back on some sobbing might-have-been as he rode on, or if some gal he wanted was smart enough to turn him down. Nothing was for keeps and forever was a lie, and the way you got over a gal was the way you got over being thrown by a bronc. You somehow got to your feet, dusted yourself off, and got back on.

Sister Rose broke into his reverie by rising off her shins and managing to plant a bare heel firmly on either side of his hips. It provided him with a new angle and it felt wild as hell. She leaned forward on braced elbows, with her palms on the ground on either side of him, and he was free to play with her swinging breasts above him as she sighed, "Ooooh, I've got you now!"

He grinned and murmured, "Powder River and let her buck!" as the crazy little brunette started moving in seemingly impossible gyrations. He was trying not to feel guilty about her, too. As she literally milked him, one part of his mind joined her with enthusiasm while that thin slice of detachment he never really lost wondered *why* he should feel the slightest reluctance. She was above the legal age of consent, and he sure wasn't costing her her virginity. No woman moved that

well without a hell of a lot of practice. She was sober and he hadn't told her any lies. What the hell was the matter with him tonight?

It kept getting better and better, and he decided not to worry about it for a while. She had him almost there, and was starting to come herself. It wasn't the way Victoria did it, and it wasn't the way Flo had done it, for no two women were ever quite the same, and that was the part he liked best. No matter how many a man made love to, each time seemed to feel the best he'd ever had. It made moving on less painful than it might have been, and it kept a man interested in his future.

She suddenly stiffened, and sort of *twanged* all over like a plucked guitar string, before falling forward to kiss him wetly as they climaxed together. For a long, bliss-filled minute, Longarm decided he was in heaven and never wanted to come down again.

Then sanity came back to pester him as he moved his lips from hers and whispered, "Be still, kitten. I think I heard something out there."

She lay atop him, listening, before she murmured, "It's just the hail on the rooftops, darling. Can we stop for a few minutes? I think I just committed suicide."

He chuckled and said, "I noticed. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

She rolled off and pulled the blanket and tarp up over the mas she snuggled at his side and answered, "I don't think I damaged myself permanently."

Shaking his head, he said, "How come a gal can be so practical about free love and so dotty about religion?"

She sniffed and said, "The two have nothing whatever to do with one another. In the days of the Elder Deities, our earthly bodies were meant to enjoy one another. *Your* bible was written by tired old sheep herders who'd forgotten what it was like to be young and healthy. Madame Blavatsky explained all that in *Isis Unveiled*. She said clothes were invented by ugly tribal elders, ashamed of their sagging breasts and withered loins."

He snorted, "Oh, for God's sake. I'd rather just talk dirty."

"I know you're just a cowboy at heart, so I can't expect you to know about such things, but—"

"Bite your tongue, girl. This may surprise you some, but I can read and write."

"Oh? Don't tell me you've read the theosophy tracts of the New Dawn."

He smiled wryly and said, "I never went to any fancy colleges. My folks were hardscrabble poor, and a war got in the way of any higher education I might have gotten around to. But I've a fair grasp of the English lingo, and I'll tell you something. When I pick up one of these new books about funny politics or spooky religious notions, I notice that the writer tries to snow me under with a lot of fancy terms Webster's dictionary never heard of. If the message is so all-fired important, how come they write so much of it in gibberish no college professor could understand?"

She ran her hand down his belly and began to fondle him as she soothed, "I'm not trying to convert you to our movement, darling. I like you the way you are, on this earthly plane."

He said, "I just figured out what's bothering me tonight. I've been feeling guilty about having to run you and your friends out of your Paradise on earth. I've been worried about what's to become of you all. I mean, it seems sort of ornery to make love to a gal you have to evict in a few days."

"Oh, I'm sure our guides will reveal a solution to Brother Seth."

"Your 'guides,' as you call them, are professional table-rappers and killers. Isn't there any way I can make you folks see that?"

"You told me you recognized our visitor, tonight, as someone you think you know. I don't want to talk about it; I just want to be here in your arms. Let your silly government and our leaders worry about the future. I joined Brother Seth to *free* myself of mundane cares."

Her expert caress was having an effect on him, and he saw that conversation wasn't her game.

He began to run his own free hand over her willing flesh, as any man would have wanted to. Sooner or later, she was going to have to face up to the facts of life.

But what business was it of his? He hadn't been sent here to make Presbyterians out of these folks. Where they went next, and what was to become of them, was no concern of the Justice Department; the fact that they were being led by a bunch of mass murderers was. The sensible way to deal with Sister Rose was the way his hand was headed. They had nothing else in common, but what they had was nice.

She guided his wrist with her own free hand and said, "Mmmm, yes, I love the way that feels."

He propped himself up on one elbow and was about to roll into position, when the night was rent by a tremendous roar. For a split-second, he thought the tent had been struck by lightning. Then he noticed that the flash had been the color of flame and that big chunks of stuff too heavy to be hail were coming down on the canvas and outside. He sprang out of the bedroll and scooped up his Winchester as Sister Rose gasped, "What was that?"

Longarm hesitated for another split-second, aware of how silly he must look, stark naked with a rifle in his hand. Then he decided, *What the hell, everybody runs around here naked anyway.*

He levered a round into the rifle's chamber and dashed out into the storm. Hailstones and raindrops drummed on his bare head and shoulders as he ran toward the cabin of Brother Seth. Then there was a flash of real lightning, and he saw other people running toward it in their birthday suits. But the cabin wasn't there!

He tripped over a board in the dark and stopped. Despite the storm, he could smell the acrid fumes of dynamite. He saw a swinging lantern moving toward him and called out, "Over here! Let's have some light!"

The man carrying the lantern joined him and held it high as Longarm gasped, "Jesus!"

The cabin had been blown to smithereens. The charge—a big one—had been set off under the floor. There was nothing left but splintered wood and scattered furniture. Longarm took the lantern in his free hand and circled the ruins, swinging the light back and forth. He found Brother Seth—what was left of him—twenty feet from where the back door had been. Despite his three hundred pounds of lard, the blast had blown him through the roof, and a lot of the lard had stuck to the boards. Longarm didn't have to roll him off his mangled face to know he was dead. The gaping wounds were hardly bleeding, and the rain had already washed him clean enough that he resembled a spilled bucket of tripe.

There wasn't anything to do but get dressed and wait for daybreak.

By dawn, the storm had died down and the thirsty land had sucked away all the puddles. The settlers were subdued and frightened as Longarm questioned each in turn, trying to place where everyone had been when the dynamite went off.

Thanks to their notions of free love, most had at least one witness to place them in other parts of the Gateway at the time. Longarm knew any two of them could be lying, and in any case, there was no telling how long the fuse had been.

Some seemed surprised to find him and Sister Rose still alive. He knew everyone had thought he'd be there with Brother Seth and the girl for the night. He felt a little better about that after taking a closer look at the bare earth where the cabin had stood. It made him feel guilty to have other folks killed by someone out to get him, but the charge had been placed under the fat man's room. Whoever had done it hadn't cared one way or the other about anyone else they might be blowing up with Brother Seth. Longarm was sure the "whoever" was Kate, or one of the other Terrible Benders. Their motive still eluded him.

The wanted woman who'd been playing ghost had apparently spotted a lawman in the crowd before lighting out so mysteriously. If that was so, why had they killed Brother Seth instead of him? The poor fat dupe hadn't been the one they had to worry about, if they were afraid of being exposed as fake spooks.

Brother Seth had gone to bed still thinking his guides and backers were Abe Lincoln and the long-dead Empress of Russia. Had they been afraid the dead man was about to tell the law something he knew? That had to be it. Kate Bender had made a fool of the law again by vanishing like the ghost she pretended to be. They hadn't cared if he lived or died, because they knew he wasn't even getting warm. He'd questioned Brother Seth alone, yet they seemed to know Brother Seth hadn't spilled anything important. That was something to study on. How could they have known what Brother Seth had told him?

He went back to the site of the cabin and looked around some more, probing the debris with his booted toe. There'd been space enough under the floorboards for someone to have crawled under to listen.

A six-inch length of copper wire caught his eye and he picked it up, muttering, "Pretty fancy."

It looked like the dynamite had been set off by one of those new magneto boxes they were starting to use in advanced mines. Like everything else about the Bender case, it added up weird as hell.

He'd gone over the old records time and again, trying to make sense of the crazy mixture of moronic brutality and sophistication. There had to be something everyone had missed about the way the twisted minds of the murderous clan operated.

Kate, at least, was said to be well-educated, and she or someone else in the family had been skilled enough to razzle-dazzle experienced lawmen with tricks they could have made a fortune with in any traveling show.

How did that match up with the notion that they grunted at each other like apes and slapped at folks with a crude sledgehammer? Why would anyone smart enough to pose as a spirit medium and able to vanish

in thin air be dumb enough to leave casually murdered bodies all over the back yard? The general feeling was that they'd been simply crazy. Longarm agreed with the crazy part, but it had been *smart*-crazy. Maybe the old man or the brother had been sort of slow; hocking an engraved watch hadn't been a brilliant move. But Kate herself had been tricky as hell. She'd just shown him how good she was. Maybe, back in Kansas, she hadn't worried about her duller-witted relatives because she'd known she'd get away, no matter what.

There'd been a brutal lack of concern about innocent bystanders in the dynamiting of this cabin. She probably gave chores like that to her brother and didn't worry if he made a mess. What was a mangled corpse or two to a lady who could vanish like smoke before the eyes of an armed lawman? It was almost as if she were *teasing* the law.

He decided to go with that, for now. The problem wasn't whether the leader of the family was insane or just didn't give a damn; the problem was the way they *hid* so well between times.

He saw he wasn't getting anywhere at the Gateway, so he found Sister Rose and asked her who was in charge, now that Brother Seth was no longer on this particular plane.

She was still in a state of shock, and the flowers in her hair had wilted. She'd put on her toga again, and was wearing sensible shoes. There was broken glass all over the place. She said she didn't know who'd lead them now. Brother Seth had always done such thinking as they thought they needed.

She asked him where he was going, and he pointed at Hunter's Rock with his chin, saying, "Up there. I'm probably on a wild-goose chase, but I'd better see if there's a gold mine or a secret cave, or maybe a hot-air balloon. I've looked all over for them on the *ground*."

As he started walking toward the granite outcrop, she fell in at his side to say, "I'm going with you. Are you serious about that balloon?"

"Not hardly. That idea was eliminated long ago. Some posse members suggested that the Benders might

have flown out of Cherryvale that way; they sure never left any tracks across the prairie. But folks would have noticed anything as wild as that. You get a fair crowd at any state fair with a balloon-ascent act. People notice a *bird* up there, if it's big enough to matter."

The ground sloped rapidly upward just at the edge of the settlement. As they started upslope, he said, "I don't hold with secret tunnels, either. Junior Bender didn't have the gumption to dig deep enough to matter."

She brightened and said, "I remember hearing, as a child, about some sort of underground railroad."

He said, "The Underground Railroad was a notion, not really a tunnel. But the idea ain't bad. You'd think it would be pretty tough to move a runaway slave a thousand miles or more without anyone noticing a strange colored face along the way. The Abolitionists didn't ferry slaves to freedom with anything very complicated. They just got the slave-hunters to look in the wrong direction, like a poker slick dealing himself a winning hand in front of God and everybody."

"You mean these people you're after might be right out in the open as they move about?"

"They have to be. Nobody knows for sure what the others look like, and old Kate must disguise herself some way."

"But you say your murdered deputy recognized them."

"I know. Maybe she gets tired of her other face at times. She might be posing as a man, or an old lady, or something. I reckon poor Harcourt caught her just being herself for a change. If she's vain enough to pose in the flesh as a dead queen, she might like to be whistled at on occasion. She's a handsome gal, as I noticed last night. But let's save our breath for the climb. I've gone over it till I'm starting to wonder if *I* could be crazy."

She took his hand as they climbed the rock together. He had to help her in some places, but it wasn't a bad climb. Only the western face, overlooking the Gateway, was really steep enough to be dangerous. He looked

for sign as they moved up over the frost-shattered scree and rounded boulders, but he didn't find any. In any case, there would have been no point in anyone running up here from the tent—not with all the empty, rolling prairie in every direction.

The rock was just rock. There were no caves, and not even enough mica to make anyone think Hunter's Rock was worth claiming as a gold mine.

Up on top, a shallow depression still held a few days' supply of rainwater. He could see at a glance why the buffalo hunters had used it as a hideout or lookout.

He could see all the way to Sunbonnet's church spire from atop the rock. He spotted Colonel Claymore's baronial house, halfway to town. It was a hell of way off, but a reasonable run in the dark, if you knew where you were going. He couldn't see Victoria's Diamond M, but he knew it was a mite closer. He'd check that angle out on the way to town.

Sister Rose pointed down and said, "Oh, look, some of the others are leaving!"

Longarm glanced down at the buckboard moving away from the tabernacle tent and said, "Yep. I'm sorry it had to happen as it did, but it makes that part of my job easier. Without a leader, these Utopias sort of dry up and blow away."

"Oh, dear, I haven't even thought about the future since last night. What ever will become of us now?"

"I can't say. Some of you will find other such places to seek the light. Some may decide they've had enough mescal and theosophy, and start looking for a job. What are you going to do, Rosie?"

"I'm not sure. Couldn't I just stay with you?"

"Not hardly. I'll stake you to a train ride home, but that's about the size of it. I can't even *think* about anything permanent until I retire and get rid of my badge and gun."

"Heavens, I'm not asking you to marry me!"

"I know what you're asking, kitten. But I have to travel light. Look me up in town when you decide

where you aim to go. I've seen all there is to see from up here, and I've got other chores to tend to today."

He saw that she was about to cry, so he said, "I wish you wouldn't, Rosie. What happened to all those grand ideas about living wild and free?"

She said, "I don't know. The part they don't mention about free love is that sometimes the *loving* part *hurts*. I guess you think I'm sort of dumb."

He took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and kissed her, then said, "I think you're a woman. You don't need a lecture from me or anyone else, so I'll not offer one. You get your thoughts sorted out and let me know where you want to be, and I'll see if I can aim you in that direction."

She sank down on the granite and said, "Leave me here for now. You're right. I have to think."

He nodded and turned away, feeling sort of sad and pleased at the same time. He climbed back down and went to his mount. He noticed that others were packing, but he didn't comment as he rode out. This part of his job was finished. Kate Bender hadn't planned to help him out, but blowing up Brother Seth hadn't been a good move on her part, if she'd had any sensible reason at all for luring these poor lostlings out here to the Sand Hills.

He passed Victoria Roundtree's spread first, of course, but he didn't feel up to talking to Victoria right now, and since she'd invited him inside, he doubted that her house was worth searching. Just for the hell of it, he tried to figure out how the owner of the Diamond M could get anything out of working with the Benders in some sneaky scheme. He couldn't come up with a thing that made sense.

He rode through the gate at Colonel Claymore's Rocking K, and wasn't challenged as he rode up to the house this time.

Someone had seen him coming, though, and the colonel came out himself, wearing a bathrobe. He scowled down at Longarm, and asked what he wanted. Longarm stayed aboard the gelding as he smiled thinly

and said, "I was wondering if you'd let me sort of look about inside your house and barns and such, Colonel?"

"Have you got a search warrant?"

"No, but I reckon I could get one if I can't butter you up."

"You do that, son. Put one foot inside my door without a proper warrant, and I swear I'll have you gunned down like a dog!"

Longarm said, "I don't like you, either. But your unfriendly words might make any lawman wonder what you're hiding in there."

"What I have is mine, and it's none of anyone else's business. You can think what you like, that's not my problem. Have you anything else to say? I was just fixing to take a bath."

Longarm shook his head and said, "Another time, then."

He rode away as the colonel slammed the door behind him. He knew he wasn't supposed to let his feelings interfere with his job, but Claymore sure tried hard to be a pain in the ass. The old goat was arrogant and used to ordering lesser mortals about. On the other hand, he didn't seem a stupid man, and they both knew a search warrant could be sent by wire. What could he be hiding?

Longarm went out to the wagon trace, rode until he was out of sight, and reined in his mount on the top of a sand hill. He dismounted and left the gelding on the far side before he lay down in the grass on the ridge and took out a cheroot. He left it unlit between his teeth. He had plenty of time to spare, so he decided to give the Rocking K an hour of it before returning to Sunbonnet.

It didn't take an hour. It was more like twenty minutes until a woman rode out of Claymore's gate, sidesaddle and fast. She was having trouble with her hat. She probably hadn't taken time to pin it right.

As he watched her go by, holding it with her free hand, he nodded and said, "Five foot two, golden ringlets, and a nice little rump to be so free with."

He was grinning, but the cheroot tasted awful and

he felt sort of sick as he added, "That's right, honey. Get home and make a loving telephone call to your poor loving husband in the Western Union office. It's no wonder you snubbed poor Flo. It takes one to know one, and, for your information, Flo was more particular who she climbed in bed with."

Chapter 9

Sooner or later, he was going to have to drop by the telegraph office again, but Longarm decided that later would do. He liked the Western Union man, and he wasn't expecting anything important on the wire. It might be a good idea to wire Marshal Vail that Kate Bender or her twin had been seen in these parts, but he knew what Vail would do about it. He'd send a full platoon of deputies and maybe a cavalry troop to tear up the scenery and mess things up worse than they already were.

He left his mount at the livery and walked over to the general store. Peggy sold him a bottle of soda water, but before he got two words out of her, the old man came out of his office.

He said, "I've been meaning to talk to you, Longarm. We've plenty of room out back, and I'm not sure it's safe for you to stay over at the saloon. By the way, there's somebody looking for you around town."

Longarm said, "Let's eat the apple a bite at a time, Constable. Why ain't I safe in that hired room?"

"Everybody knows where it's at. The bloodstains on the ceiling make a perfect bullseye. Anyone sitting down below could fire up through the floorboards as they was leaving, and even if they missed, it would make most men nervous as hell."

"Hmm, you've been reading Ned Buntline, I see. But it's a kindly thought, and I may take you up on your offer of less noticeable quarters. What about this stranger? Did he say who he was and what he wanted with me?"

Pop said, "No, he just asked if you were still in

town. I asked him if he was law, and he said he'd met you in Denver one time."

"What does he look like?"

"Saddle tramp. Maybe a cowhand looking for a job. He's about your size, maybe a mite heavier. Wears his guns low, border-style."

"*Two* guns? I don't reckon you thought to ask what his intentions might be?"

"I don't make him out as a gunslick. He smiled when he spoke your name."

"Where is he now?"

"Saloon, I reckon. There's no place else for a stranger to hang out in Sunbonnet."

Longarm put down the bottle and opened his coat to hang free of his gun. Then he put a cheroot between his teeth, lit it with a sulfur match from the store counter, and said, "I'd best see what he has in mind, then."

Pop asked, "Do you want me to go with you? I could pin on my tin star."

Longarm said, "No, thanks. If he knows my name, he knows I'm law. I'll talk to you about your offer of the room later, Lord willing."

As he strode out the door, the girl suddenly blurted, "Be careful!"

Longarm didn't answer. He aimed to be careful.

He walked across the sandy street and entered the saloon by the side door, a trick he'd learned a long time ago. The bartender saw him and nodded silently at a big man seated in a corner with his back to the wall.

Longarm ran the face through his mind. It didn't match up with anyone important enough to remember. He was a dark man in his late thirties. His eyebrows met in the middle, and he needed a shave. His clothes were dark, nondescript, and trail-dusty.

Longarm stepped over to the bar and ordered a Maryland rye before he turned, leaning his elbow on the bar, and said, "Howdy. You look like you've ridden a ways."

Longarm noticed that the bartender seemed nervous as hell, as if he wanted to say something. But he kept

it to himself as he slid a shotglass and bottle near Longarm's elbow and moved away.

The stranger said, "I'm here looking for a gent called Longarm."

"You just found him. What's your pleasure, friend?"

The man in the corner rose ominously, and said, "I ain't no friend of yours. I was a friend of poor Flo's, and they tell me you got her shot."

Longarm said, "I wasn't pleased at all about it, either. Why don't we have a drink together while we talk about it?"

The big man scowled and said, "I never rode all this way to drink or talk with anybody, damn it. I came here today to shoot me a skunk."

Longarm studied him through narrowed, thoughtful eyes. There was something wrong with this setup. The man's hands were hanging well clear of the guns he wore on both hips, and Longarm had no false modesty about his own rep.

He said, "I'd like to shoot the rascal who killed Flo, too. But if you mean to blame *me* for what happened, I suggest you rethink your quarrel. We're not a couple of kids, and this ain't Dodge a few years back. You look like a man who can handle himself if he has to, but you'd better consider if you have to. I don't mind being called a skunk, if it makes you feel good. But before we get in deeper, I'll remind you I'm wearing a badge on my wallet."

"That never gave you no right to get Flo killed, damn your eyes!"

Longarm shook his head and said, "You don't look like a man trying to commit suicide, so let's assume you draw faster than hell. Where does that leave you, even if you win? I don't know if it's nailed up anywhere, but I'm sure there's a city ordinance somewhere about smoking up a federal deputy."

"Screw your laws. I follow the unwritten law of a gent who don't hold with killing women! I can see how you've cleared your coattail from that cross-draw rig, so I'm ready anytime you are."

"Oh, shit, this is getting silly."

"What's the matter, Longarm? Are you afraid of me, you yellow pimp?"

Longarm nodded and said to himself, *Yep, it's a border setup, sure as hell.* Then he said aloud, "Where's your sidekick, friend? He ought to be a mite closer in, don't you reckon?"

The man made a slight movement with his right hand, but Longarm didn't budge as the stranger said, "Sidekick? I don't need no backup for the likes of you. I ain't afraid of that gimpy old storekeeper who's the only law here, either. This is strictly between you and me, savvy?"

Longarm turned away, keeping an eye on the long-winded stranger in the mirror behind the bar, as he said in a disgusted voice, "I swear to God, I sure wish you boys would show more imagination."

"Draw, you son of a bitch!"

Longarm ignored him as he tried to catch the bartender's eye. The frightened man was down at the far end. He'd have been even farther away if the bar had run a foot farther toward the front window.

Longarm saw that he was going to have to figure things out himself, so he casually picked up the bottle and regretfully threw it into the mirror as he slid sideways along the bar, drawing his own gun, with his back to the challenger in the corner!

The shattered glass and red-eye cascaded down behind the bar, and a man's head shot up from where he'd been crouching.

He just had time to gasp, "What the hell!" before Longarm blew his face off at point-blank range and rolled away, spinning low under his own smoke and dropping to one knee.

The one in the corner had one gun out and the other one coming, when Longarm fired across the saloon at him. He dropped in the corner, tipping over the table. So Longarm put three rounds through the tabletop for luck, whipped out his derringer as a backup for his nearly empty Colt, and moved in fast.

He kicked the table out of the way, then he kicked the man lying facedown near an overturned spittoon.

Tobacco juice and spit was spreading against the side of his face, so he didn't seem to be faking.

Longarm asked the bartender, "What about the other one?"

The man stammered, "He's dead as hell! I was trying to figure out how to warn you, but he was holding a gun on me!"

"I know. I figured that out right away, but I had to take a chance on his exact position. This ain't the first time someone's tried it."

The bartender gasped, "Oh, Christ, I thought I was dead for sure! If you hadn't been so smart, they'd have killed me too, before they lit out!"

Longarm said, "Not hardly. They meant for you to spread word of their charade."

Before he could elaborate, the constable and a quartet of townies burst through the swinging doors, guns drawn.

Longarm said, "Put them away, boys; it's over. You'll find one in the corner behind that table, and another one behind the bar. It was the old 'you killed my friend' play. I'm feeling sort of insulted, and I mean to have a drink, once I reload."

The bartender said, "They talked crazy as hell, Pop! The said Longarm, here, killed Flo. But I've worked for Flo since her old man died, and I've never seen either of them before!"

Longarm didn't answer, so Pop said, "They must have heard about it and used it as their excuse."

The bartender asked, "What excuse? They was planning pure murder! The one in the corner was trying to get Longarm to fight with him so the other one could shoot him in the back!"

Longarm finished reloading and ambled over to explain, "They call it 'caught in the crossfire' at the coroner's hearing. They probably meant to just do the job they'd been paid to do and ride out. But a pro likes to leave himself an ace-in-the-hole in case he's caught. You would have been left here in the gunsmoke, confused as hell, to tell a rattled tale about what happened, had things gone the other way. Just

blowing a man away can get you hanged, whether he's a lawman or not. They wanted to leave the killing confused by possibly noble motives, and other lawmen don't hunt as serious when there's a lady's name mixed up in it. More than one old boy's been buried quiet to protect his memory. My office was supposed to think I got my fool self shot over a woman. They didn't know my boss too well, but anyone investigating my demise might have been thrown wide of the mark. They'd have wasted a lot of time looking up Flo's old boyfriends, too."

Pop went over to the corner and stared down at the corpse before he said, "I've never seen him before, on paper or in the flesh. Do you reckon they were hired to do you, Longarm?"

"I can't think of any other reason. They were both sober, over twenty-one, and had to ask me my name."

"Jesus! One of them must have been the one who shot poor Flo, thinking she was you! That's how they knew she was dead! But where could they have been hiding out? It rained frogs and trout last night, and this one's leather vest hasn't been wet for some time."

"I noticed. Nobody could camp out in the hills around here without being spotted by some rider, or even a kid hunting rabbits. Are there any empty houses within a day's ride of here?"

The other men thought. Then one of them said, "It's summer vacation."

Pop started to ask what he meant. Then he nodded and said, "The schoolhouse, of course. The kids have been out of school for nigh a month, and the teacher's visiting in Omaha!"

Longarm had been ahead of him. As he headed for the door, Pop fell in beside him, calling back, "Clanton, you're deputized till the doc gets here. He'll know what to do."

As the two of them walked up the street, Longarm said, "I don't know if you're brave or just foolish. Have you considered there might be more in the gang?"

"You're going, ain't you, son?"

"It's my job."

"Well, it's my job too. Even if you don't take me serious as a lawman."

Longarm said, "I take you serious, Constable."

"I know. That's one of the things I like about you, son."

They got to the last houses before the schoolyard and, by unspoken agreement, circled off the street behind the board fence running along the side of a house lot. The boards were six feet in length, so Longarm moved in a crouch to keep his hat from looking like a duck in a shooting gallery to anyone in the school. He came to a gap where a board had fallen off. He glanced the other way to see whether the wall of the house blocked sky light through the fence. It did. To anyone staring out of a schoolhouse window, the slit in the fence would be as dark as the windows looked from here.

As he stared through the gap at the apparently empty schoolhouse, Pop said, "It's wide enough to squeak through, one at a time."

But Longarm said, "Simmer down some. It's a long run with no cover. I'm trying to figure a way to work closer in before we pay a social call."

The back door of the house behind them opened, and a girlish voice called out, "What are you boys up to out here?"

Longarm saw that it was the Western Union man's little blonde. She was wearing a kimono, and didn't look like she was worried about them stealing anything. She was grinning like a cow-town whore on Saturday. It *was* Saturday, come to think of it.

Longarm snapped, "Get back inside and stay away from the windows. Talk to your man on your telephone or something."

"Won't you tell me what's going on?" she said with a pout.

He said, "We don't know just what's going on, but it might be noisy. Your husband knows about the shootout in the saloon by now. Call him up and let him tell you all about it."

She went back inside. When Longarm turned back

to Pop, he saw that the old man had stepped through the gap and was out in the open. Longarm called, "Get back here, damn it!" but Pop said, "Cover me. I'm going in. Look out for Peggy if I don't make it."

The constable started running for the doorway across the yard as Longarm sighed, "Oh, shit," and drew his .44. He couldn't yell out to the fool. If the schoolhouse wasn't empty, anyone hearing a shout would move to a window to see what was up.

Pop was a third of the way there, and a buckboard was moving along the roadway beyond the schoolhouse. It was Sister Rose and little Sister Lilly. He didn't want Rose stopping, and the older woman was too deaf to hear a warning, in any case. She was likely to move in any damned fool direction, if things got hectic.

The women in the buckboard were dressed sensibly, and the wagon bed was loaded. They hadn't noticed Pop, and maybe it was all for the best. Anyone inside the schoolhouse must have been watching them as they drove by, for Pop had made it to the sandblasted wall beside the door.

Longarm assumed that the older lawman would cover him as he made his own move across the yard. But as Longarm stepped through the gap, Pop opened the door and tore into the schoolhouse, shooting!

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" Longarm groaned, breaking into a run. As he moved toward the sound of gunfire, a couple of full-grown horses burst out of the doorway at him. He swerved to avoid their frightened stampede, and as he was almost to the doorway, another cow pony charged out at him, saddled up and headed for points east. The doorway was filled with gunsmoke, but the sounds had faded. Longarm dove through the doorway and crabbed to one side as a bullet parted daylight where he'd just been!

He fired at the orange flash in the haze of thick smoke, then moved away from his own wink of flame. He heard a thud somewhere, but nobody fired back as he wound up in a corner, fresh out of places to go.

He saw that he was behind a kid's desk that was bolted to the floor. He called out, "Constable?"

There was no answer.

He muttered, "Shit!" and stayed where he was until he could see better. As he peered across the desktops, he saw that the blackboard over the teacher's desk had been shattered by a round or two. There was nothing else to see. He got down on his hands and knees, his gun butt on the floor and pointing the way he was crawling, as he peered along the pine planking between the cast-iron desk stands.

There were horse turds between the kid's desks. The gunslicks had been camped in here with their mounts, right enough. He came to an empty bean can, picked it up with his free left hand, and tossed it over his shoulder to clatter in the corner behind him.

Nothing. It stayed quiet. He saw a pair of boots and moved on until he could make out who they belonged to. It was Pop. The old man lay on his back with a surprised look on his face as he stared up at the ceiling, gun in hand.

Longarm found the other body in a corner. The stranger was a kid of eighteen or twenty, and he was half-sitting, with an old cap-and-ball conversion in his lap. You could see how he'd slid down the wall from the bullet-shattered blackboard, leaving a red streak.

Longarm had kept count of the horses, so he rose to his feet. He felt a bit numb and a little sick inside. By the time he stepped out through the doorway, people were running toward the schoolhouse from all directions.

One of the townies he'd spoken to a few short minutes ago in the saloon asked what had happened, and when Longarm told him, he gasped, "Oh, Jesus, what a fool thing for Pop to do!"

Longarm shrugged and said, "He did the best he knew how. And now I have to tell Peggy about it. Would you sort of take over here, until the doc and me work out the usual chores?"

He walked slowly down the sandy street to the general store, hating what he knew he had to do, and

knowing there was no way to make it easier. He'd traveled this trail before, and he knew that, no matter how you told a man's kin he was dead, you were cutting them to the quick.

Little Peggy was out on the boardwalk when Longarm got to Pop's store. She smiled uncertainly, looking to the sides and all around him, as if she expected to see someone else with him.

Her smile faded as Longarm slowly took off his Stetson and said, "Let's go inside, Peg. We've got some things to talk over, alone."

It was more than an hour before Longarm was free to send more wires at the Western Union office. The telegrapher kept asking fool questions as Longarm wrote on a mess of blanks, and the tall deputy answered as many as he could in terse, short phrases. He knew he was giving the young clerk a lot of key-tapping, and the wires wouldn't be sent in any case until he'd been filled in on all the excitement. He said his wife had called on their private telephone and told him all hell had busted loose at the far end of town. But she hadn't had much of a grasp on the situation, and had gotten a lot of her facts wrong.

Longarm wondered what it was going to be like when women had telephones in every house, like the papers said. It sure promised to make gossip easier.

He tore up the wire he'd started to the authorities in the town back East where the dead Deputy Harcourt had been reared. The short, money-saving way was sort of confusing, and he didn't want anyone wiring back for details he may have left out. So he wrote it like a letter, and if the accounting office gave him hell for wasting the taxpayers' money, so be it.

He brought Marshal Vail up to date, as best he could figure things out. Then he wired the Land Office, telling them their problem with the squatters had solved itself, and asking for a few details about other land titles. As he tried to figure out whether there were any other loose ends to ask about, the telephone behind the counter rang and he felt relieved. It was hard to

think, with a curious cuss asking questions every few seconds. He ignored the clerk's conversation until the man said, "He's right here this very minute, honey. Why don't you tell him about it?"

As Longarm glanced up with a frown, the clerk put the improvised contraption on the counter and said, "The little woman wants to talk to you about something funny going on."

Longarm took the earpiece gingerly and bent to the transmitter, raising his voice to say, "Hello?"

Telephones took getting used to. The woman at the other end didn't sound like herself over the wire, and it was sort of like talking to a parrot. She said, "Some strange men are poking about over in the school, Mr. Long."

He said, "Doc Sawyer's convened a coroner's jury, ma'am. They're probably having a look-see before they put it down on paper."

"You may be right, Mr. Long, but I've never seen any of them before, and I'm sure I know everyone around here, at least by sight."

"What do they look like, ma'am? How are they dressed?"

"Like cowhands. There were three or four of them, last time I peeked out the side window. Why don't you sneak over here and I'll let you watch through the curtains."

He said he'd drop by in a few minutes, and handed the set back to her husband. The two of them jawed on the telephone for a time, and by the time Longarm had finished his last telegram blank, the clerk had hung up.

The Western Union man took the pile and said, "We're sure making money on you today, Deputy. Are you going over to my place now?"

"Might as well. You want to come along?"

"With all these wires to send? It'll take me hours! What good would I be there, anyway?"

"Your woman's alone at your house."

"She didn't say she was worried about those strangers. If you can't take care of her, I don't know who can. I'm no good with anything but a telegraph key.

I'm not even sure which end of a gun the bullet comes out of."

Then he frowned and added, "You don't reckon Goldie is in any danger, do you?"

"Not from gunplay. Whoever she spotted in the schoolyard doesn't seem to be skulking. It sounds like some curious cusses just poking about, but I'd better take a look at them."

He had a thought and asked, "Are there any other big outfits like the Diamond M and Rocking K around Sunbonnet?"

The clerk mused a bit before he said, "Not that I know of. Most of the folks around here keep a few cows on the open range. But since all the fuss between the two big outfits, they've been grazing them to the south. Some of Claymore's riders are testy as hell, and both sides are on the prod. The smaller fry don't like to get between the big fish when they're snapping at one another."

"That's what I figured." Longarm tugged thoughtfully at a corner of his mustache. "I've got another question. Counting the gunslicks who trailed me from Alliance, and allowing that the gents your wife just spotted are harmless hands she just doesn't know, at least five guns have been hired from here or somewhere damned close."

"Hell, I can count."

"Can you give me a straight answer that Western Union might not want you to? I know messages sent through you are supposed to be private, but I'm a federal agent working on a serious case."

"You mean has anyone been sending wires to places like Leadville or Deadwood, where it's said an unemployed gun can be picked up cheap?"

"I admire a man who thinks on his feet. What about it?"

"I'd tell you if anyone from Sunbonnet had been recruiting guns by Western Union, but you're barking up the wrong tree. Wouldn't it be kind of dumb to leave a public record of the transaction, anyway?"

"Yep. I'm just covering all bets. It's usually done by

spreading the word sort of quiet. Both the Diamond M and the Rocking K deny having hired the two who were killed by Spike the other night. I'd be wasting my time asking about the last three Pop and me accounted for between us."

The clerk nodded soberly, and said, "Pop died a hero, even though some say it was dumb as hell. Do you think it would help if me and Goldie invited Peggy to stay with us for a time?"

Longarm said, "She took it pretty well. Pop wasn't immediate family, and she seems to be getting used to having her relations wiped out by Sioux and such. She said she aims to carry on, since the store and house are hers now."

"Just the same, she shouldn't be alone until she gets over the shock."

"She won't be. I said I'd take her up on Pop's offer of bed and board until I'm ready to ride out."

He waited for the man to raise an eyebrow, but the clerk was a trusting soul. A man would have to be, to stay married to the saucy Goldie for seven whole years.

He left the man to pound out his messages while he went to visit with his wife. Goldie was waiting at the back door in her kimono, and he noticed she didn't have it too securely fastened in front.

She led him through the kitchen and into a bedroom of the one-story house. The drapes were drawn and it was sort of cozy in there. Goldie told him he could peek out through the drapes, and he did so. He could see the schoolhouse plain enough, but there was nobody in the yard. The girl was sort of leaning against him as she explained, "They rode off just before you came."

He said, "I wish you'd used your telephone to tell us, ma'am. I seem to have walked all this way in the hot sun for nothing."

She said, "Well, I wouldn't want to think I'd wasted your time."

Then she opened her kimono and let it fall around her feet on the rug.

Longarm stared down at her. He suddenly found it

sort of hard to breathe. She had a cute enough little figure with her clothes on, but stark naked in the soft light of her bedroom, it looked even better.

He said, "I wish you'd wear more duds, ma'am. You're a married woman, and this would look sort of funny if someone were to bust in on us."

"I don't get too thick with my neighbors, and my husband never leaves the office when he's on duty. He won't be home before suppertime."

Longarm tried to step around her as he suggested, "Why don't you make him apple dumplings or something, then? He's a hard-working man and he's head over heels in love with you."

She barred his way with her lush body, putting a tiny, soft hand on each of Longarm's elbows as she said, "I treat him right. But I'm a high-spirited girl, and no one man has ever had enough to satisfy me."

He said, "I noticed. You're playing it damned dangerous, honey."

"Pooh! You're not afraid of my little hubby, are you?"

"You're damned right! I've been at too many trials where the matter was discussed before the jury box. No man can win against an outraged husband, Goldie. If he's not shot by the wronged man, he's asking to be hanged if it goes the other way."

She laughed and said, "I can't believe you're afraid of David. You could break him over your knee like a stick!"

Longarm said, "If your husband's name is David, he was named for another runt who went up against a bigger man. You must be crazy, Goldie. Riding out to the Rocking K is bad enough, but offering yourself to a stranger under your husband's roof goes beyond adultery into sheer stupidity!"

She laughed and said, "All right, it does add spice to my naughty ways. But 'fess up, don't you feel just a little naughty too, right now?"

He said, "What I feel or don't feel ain't the question. I'm leaving now, and I aim to forget this fool conversation as soon as I step out of your door."

"Come on, no one will ever know."

"*I'd* know, ma'am, and I have to face your man when I go to pick up the answers to some wires he's sending for me right this minute. This game of yours is between the two of you, and it ain't my business. So let's part friendly and say no more about it."

She saw that he meant it, and it made her mad as hell. She sneered, "You don't fool me with your gallant talk. You're like all men. You're feeling smug and self-satisfied right now because, even by saying no, you think you've had your own way with me!"

He was finding this conversation tedious, so he put a hand on each of her naked shoulders and gently but firmly moved her out of his way before walking out, not looking back. She followed, cussing, and as he closed the outer door behind him, something that sounded like crockery shattered against the inside of the back door. He chuckled and kept walking.

He supposed, in a way, she was right about some things. A man did like to think he was running things. The Lord knew, Goldie had studied men. He doubted if she thought about much else. Longarm knew half the trouble men got into over women was more the result of curiosity and the need to win than of the actual need to get laid. It was great to get a woman to give you her all, and it hurt to be turned down. He'd learned to leave forbidden fruit alone by reminding himself, as Goldie had said, that the choice was his. He left his friends' women alone, and he didn't trifle with anything close to home.

He headed back to the store and Peggy. The little redhead wasn't on his list one way or the other, and he said he'd help her put her affairs in order while she got used to Pop being dead. He had no plans to press his luck with her. She was still shook up, and he really didn't know how much she'd learned in college. He'd play the cards as they were dealt. He couldn't think of anyone who'd shoot him if the game got friendly, and there was always Victoria if it didn't. Vickie had been expecting him to pay her another visit, and that was probably the way a really smart gent would play it.

Vickie was great in bed and Peggy was sort of young. But Colonel Claymore was already accusing him of siding with the Diamond M, so the smartest thing he coul do would be to leave both gals alone.

It wasn't like he was stuck here forever and, for such a small neighborhood, he hadn't suffered too much celibacy lately. He'd spent lonelier weekends in Denver. Maybe he should ask Peggy if she had any good books, and just curl up by himself.

He got to the store and went inside. The little redhead looked up from the counter she was dusting and said, "Oh, I'm so glad you're back, Mr. Long. People have been sort of shy about coming to shop, with Pop over there in the church. I've been dying for some company."

Longarm said something about moving boxes and barrels, if she wanted, and they both knew they were just talking to fill the silence as he read her intentions in her warm green eyes.

So much for good intentions. But, what the hell, it was early yet.

'Later that night, Longarm studied the four sets of bare toes at the far end of Peggy's bed as he lit a smoke. The girl's unbound red hair was spread across his chest as she snuggled in the crook of his shoulder.

He'd thought she was asleep, but she suddenly giggled and said, "I've been thinking about us, darling. I'm sort of confused, but I feel so happy."

He ran his free hand along her bare spine as he blew a smoke ring and said, "I can't remember a happier Saturday night, either. You're sure you know how to take care of yourself right?"

"Of course. I told you I went to an advanced girl's college back East. I'm not ashamed or worried. I knew the first minute I laid eyes on you that I wanted what just happened to happen. The part I'm mixed up about is—well, just how I wound up here naked in bed with you. I remember we got to sort of flirting over supper, and you started kissing the nape of my neck while we were doing the dishes. And then, the next thing I knew,

I was up here in your arms. Do you always work so fast?"

He took a drag on his smoke before he said, "Nope. Sometimes I get my face slapped."

She started toying with the hair on his chest as she said, "Not very often, I'll bet. You're amazing. You didn't use any force and, while I'm not a virgin, I don't remember dragging you in here by the hair. I've always put up at least a token struggle with the boys I've known before. A girl's not just supposed to throw herself at a man, you know."

He said, "I never wrestle with a lady. It don't seem fair. When things are right between a man and a maid, there's little call for busting up the furniture about it."

She chuckled and said, "I noticed. You just took me to bed and started undressing me like we were . . . old friends. I remember thinking I should do or say something, but you were doing it so gentle and kissing me so nice, and then I started to say something dumb, and then I guess I sort of went out of my head for a while, and it was wonderful."

He didn't answer. He'd had this conversation before, with men as well as women. He really had no idea just what it was they meant about his "secret." He didn't think he had one. He'd never found any way to get inside a gal who really didn't want him to. So when he ran up against one, he just eased off and dealt himself out of her game. On the other hand, he'd learned that if a woman really wanted a man, there wasn't much he could do but take it like a man. The woman made three-quarters of the moves, and let the man think she was his. You could mess things up with the wrong word or a clumsy grab, but if you could just avoid spooking her, there wasn't anything too complicated about lovemaking. Hell, *sheep* did it, and he'd never met a sheep who'd read a book on the subject.

She ran her hand down his torso and began to fondle him as she mused aloud, "I really thought you'd ride on before I could figure out a way to tell you how I felt about you. I'm sort of tongue-tied when I want something badly. I can see *you've* talked enough. The

boys around the pool hall must have been more experienced than the older girls in my sorority."

He said, "I never heard anything in a pool hall I could use in bed. Most of the sneaky tricks they snicker about seem sort of dumb. Let me snuff out this smoke before you twist that poor thing off."

She murmured shyly, "Just lie still. There's something I never tried before. One of the girls I went to school with said French girls did it, and it sounded terribly wicked and disgusting at the time, but all of a sudden, I'm kind of curious. Would you think I was, well, queer?"

He kissed her hair and said, "Nothing between a man and woman is queer, unless it hurts."

She giggled and started kissing her way down his body. Peggy was thin enough to be called skinny. Her hip bones and ribs were barely covered by her milk-white skin, but her breasts were big and firm. It was funny how every woman he'd ever met with that kind of a build was wilder than hell in bed.

He found himself breathing faster as her long red hair trailed her head down his belly. She moved her face into position above his groin, timidly kissed the tip of what she held in her hand, and said, "Oh, no, I don't think I can."

He reached out to get rid of the cheroot and said, "Don't do it, then."

Then she shuddered, opened her mouth, and suddenly started trying to swallow him. He closed his eyes and hissed in pleasure. He could tell she'd done it before. She did it too well not to have practiced a bit. But she'd told him she wasn't a virgin, and he guessed a lady was entitled to certain secrets. From the way she made love, she must have been going crazy since she came back from the East.

After they'd finished in a more socially approved position, Peggy begged to get on top, so he let her. He was glad he'd passed on Goldie's dangerous game that afternoon.

As she settled on top of him and started corkscrewing around, she leaned forward until her hair was in his

face and her nipples were teasing his chest. She asked, "Do you think I'm terribly perverse, sweetheart?"

He said, "No more than me. Don't worry about it. I'll let you know when the game gets too rich for my blood."

She said, "This is going to shock you, but there's something else I'm curious about. You see, I want to give myself to you in ways I've never given myself to any other man."

"I'm not complaining, Peg. You're just fine, old-fashioned."

She said, "Hold very still," as she rose off his shaft and reached down between her thighs. He knew what she was planning, and as she slowly settled down with a gasp of mingled pleasure and discomfort, he knew she didn't have to be taught this way, either. Where in hell had she learned all these tricks? She'd been home for a couple of years, and didn't have any young hands sparking her in Sunbonnet.

She moved gingerly until she got used to his size, then she said, "It feels funny, doesn't it? It's sort of thrilling, in a crazy way, once you get used to it in there."

He didn't answer as he started thrusting up to meet her. But before he could come, she suddenly climbed off the bed, and got on her hands and knees on the floor.

"Uh, maybe I'd better wash off if we aim to go dog-style, Peg."

"No, no, I want it in the same place. Hurry!"

He swung off the bed, planted his bare feet on the rug, and got a grip on each of her thin hips as she reached down to guide him in. She was looser now, and could take him all the way. Her buttocks were as thin as a teenaged boy's, and Longarm wasn't sure he ought to be doing this. His pubis was hitting her tailbone with each stroke, and he'd hurt her if he wasn't careful. She had her head on the mattress and was rolling it from side to side as she played with herself while he took her by the back door. He leaned back and let himself go, and it felt crazy, but good.

Then all hell broke loose outside the room.

He exploded inside Peggy as the sounds of gunshots faded. Then he was out of her and headed for the door. He snatched his Colt from the gunbelt draped over the bedpost as he went by.

The house was dark, but moonlight streamed through the open windows and he could see that he was alone, so far. He sniffed, and smelled gunsmoke. It was coming from another bedroom—the guest room he'd originally been invited to spend the night in!

The door was ajar, so Longarm kicked it open with his bare foot and dove in, crabbing to get his back to a wall. There was nobody in the room. He ran to the window to look out. There was no glass left in one of the panes and he felt broken glass under his calloused heel.

There was no movement outside, so he went to the dresser after pulling down the shade. He fumbled for the box of matches he remembered there, and struck a light for the oil lamp on the dresser.

Peggy was in the doorway, looking scared as well as skinny. She gasped, "Look at the bed!" and Longarm did.

There were feathers still floating down like falling snow. The pillows in the empty bed had been blasted, both of them. He stepped over for a closer look and muttered, "Shotgun. Ten-gauge, from the way they blew things apart in here. They fired both barrels from outside, with the muzzle against the glass."

"My God! They must have thought you were sleeping there!"

"Yep. We'd best get dressed. Folks will have heard, and they'll be coming to inquire about our health directly."

He washed and pulled his clothes on, while Peggy slipped into a house robe. When someone started pounding on the kitchen door, he went to it and said, "I heard. Sounds like it came from just down the way."

The men left to knock on other doors, and Peggy, who'd just joined him, asked, "Why did you lie? Do

you want the man who just tried to kill you to get away?"

He said, "Why don't you brew some coffee? We've got some sorting out to do, Peg. I sent the townies off because I don't want to waste time jawing with people who either don't know or won't tell the truth."

"But the one with the shotgun can't have gone far!"

"He's far enough, by now. There're clouds again, and we're in for another storm. The weather's like that on the plains, this time of the year. We spent today in the dead center of a big circle of hail and twisters. We figure to get hit by the other side pretty soon, but let's not talk about the weather. I want a few straight answers before I go tearing around after any more false leads."

She put the coffee on and took a seat at the kitchen table before she nodded gravely and said, "All right. All cards on the table. What do you want to know?"

"Pop ran the post office and such, up until this afternoon. He must have the nearest thing there is to a county record book, right?"

"Of course. It's in his office. Shall I get it for you?"

"I'll study it later, as I go through his desk. Before I think anything dumb about a jealous lover, was anyone in Sunbonnet sleeping with you, aside from your uncle?"

She flushed beet red, and lowered her eyes as she stammered, "He wasn't really my uncle, just a friend of my folks, but after he took me in . . . How did you guess that, Custis?"

"Look, honey, I'm sort of a randy critter myself, and I'm not trying to shame anybody. He was a man and you're a woman, and you were living together. His wife has been dead for a while, and he wasn't after anyone else in town. He didn't have the twisted, bitter look of a dirty old man not getting any, either. As for you— It may not sound delicate, but you've been at it some, since you got out of school."

She started to cry and he made his voice gentle as he said, "I told you I didn't think it was shameful, Peg. I never sleep alone any more than I can help, either."

"You must think I'm a whore."

"No, I don't, Peg. I think you're a healthy, pretty gal with natural feelings and a shy way of showing them. As for Pop, how could I put a man down for doing something I just did?"

"I wasn't in love with him, just fond and— All right, I like to have a man inside me, as you know only too well. He wasn't nasty about it. He didn't force me. He just sort of started *doing* it, a few months after he took me in."

"Forget that part. Does everyone else think he was your next of kin?"

"Of course. He said they'd wonder, otherwise."

"He sounds like a smart old man. So this is what you have to do, Peg. You have to bury anything naughty the two of you might have been up to, along with Pop. Just go on being his loving niece, and keep this house and the store business. I can't see you as town constable, but I'll show you how to fill out the forms to get his job as postmaster."

She looked up at him in dawning wonder as she asked, "You mean you'll cover up for me? But you're a lawman!"

"Hell, living with a friend of your folks ain't a federal offense. It ain't like you're robbing any rightful heirs, so what the hell."

She got up and came over to him, putting her head against his chest as she sobbed, "Oh, God, you're nicer than I ever dreamed you could be! I feel like such a slut. When I found myself in this fix, with Pop dead and you the only law for miles . . ."

"I know. I thought you were working pretty hard to butter me up, considering Pop's not in the ground yet. You see, Peg, I tend to get buttered up a lot, packing a badge the way I do. I usually know when a gal's after me because she's scared."

She laughed bitterly, and said, "I thought I was being so clever. But I really did enjoy it. How come you went along with my childish seduction?"

"You just answered part of it. I enjoyed it, too. You're pretty as anything, and I'm not made of wood."

"I noticed. What was the other part that made you act so foolish?"

"When Pop invited me to bed down in that room, he did it in front of a mess of folks. I sort of plumped the bed up to make it look occupied before I went to bed with you in the other room."

She laughed, a bit less uncertainly this time, and said, "I'm sure glad for both of us. I really did like you, even before I found out you were a saint."

"Is that why you were trying so hard to please me while you were faking your own pleasure?"

She didn't answer for a moment. Then she asked, "My God, isn't there anything you don't know, Custis?"

"Well, I don't know what the hell's been going on around here, but Pop's old records might help. Any man as dirty-minded as me might have sensed that you didn't have your heart in bed with you, Peg. You worked too hard to please me for a woman having a good time of her own."

"I was trying to respond fully, but I was so worried you'd guess what you must have known early on."

He took her in his arms and said, "Well, you've nothing to worry about now. Do you want to see if you can just lay back and enjoy it this time? I don't mind doing all the work, with a gal as pretty as you."

She nodded, but asked, "What about the records you wanted to look over?"

"Later. Let's get sort of relaxed, and then we'll put our heads to what's going on around us."

He picked her up and carried her to bed, and the next time Peg sobbed that she was coming, he knew he could believe her.

Chapter 10

Longarm didn't feel like going to the double burial Sunday morning, but he knew it was expected of him, so he went anyway. The churchyard was crowded as Parson Meeker droned the usual meaningless platitudes and the overcast sky threatened to drown them all any minute. As before, it was sultry and still, and some of the women in the crowd carried folded umbrellas. Apparently, everyone from miles around had come, and Longarm studied the few faces in the crowd that he didn't know already. Nobody matched any wanted fliers he'd ever seen, and nobody seemed to be missing.

Colonel Claymore and his Rocking K riders were there, trying not to notice Victoria, Spike, and the others from the Diamond M. Goldie and David were there, paying the respects of Western Union. The little blonde looked like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, and Longarm wondered how many men in the crowd had had her.

He was bathed and wore a fresh shirt, but he felt sort of sticky and uncomfortable anyway. Between the lovemaking and poring over the old records in Pop's office half the night, what he really wanted was eight hours of sleep, with nothing on his mind.

He noticed that the town hadn't waited for Sunday to dispose of the less respected remains. Parson Meeker had been decent enough to erect a simple pine cross over each of the graves beyond the edge of hallowed ground. Longarm didn't know where the Church of Ancestral Wisdom had planted Brother Seth, but it didn't seem to matter. If they'd put up a marker, some cow was sure to trample it over, now that the little

Utopia had reverted to open range again. That part of his job had turned out easier than anyone had a right to expect. Even Harcourt could have dispossessed the squatters. It was starting to look like that hadn't been the reason he'd been killed.

His stated reason sounded even dumber. If any of the Terrible Benders were around here, they were too well disguised for a green lawman to have spotted them. Longarm saw a dozen men in the crowd who could have been the Bender *men,* father and son. All anyone really had to go on was that they'd been sort of tall. He hadn't seen a woman around here who looked like the notorious Kate, yet she'd been out there at the Gateway, if only for the few minutes it had taken her to make a fool of him.

It seemed to take a million years, but at last the two pine coffins of Pop and Flo were in the ground, and Longarm walked back to the telegraph office with David, the Western Union man.

The telegrapher had told him at the funeral that there was a wire from Billy Vail waiting for him. When Longarm asked why he hadn't brought it with him, the clerk said he hadn't thought of it. It was no wonder his wife had been making a fool of him all this time; the man seemed a mite absent-minded, except where electrical gadgets were concerned.

The wire from Longarm's home office read:

COME BACK STOP YOU HAVE EVICTED SQUATTERS STOP NO NEED FOR YOUR DUBIOUS TALENTS THERE STOP SUGGEST IF BENDERS EVER THERE THEY ARE LONG GONE STOP LET LOCAL LAW INVESTIGATE RANDOM SHOOTINGS OF LOCAL TALENT STOP

David asked if there would be a reply, and Longarm told him the boss wouldn't be in the office on Sunday anyway.

The telegrapher said, "He sounds like he means it,

though. What are you going to tell him Monday morning, Longarm?"

"I reckon I'd better tell him I'm on my way, unless I aim to get fired."

"Do you think he's right about the Terrible Benders lighting out again?"

"I can't say for sure that they were ever here, except I sure saw a gal who *looked* like Kate Bender."

"She was stirring up those spiritualist rascals, right?"

"Yeah. Spooks are one of Kate's hobbies. I wonder if she believes in them herself."

"She sure likes dead folks around her. This part of Nebraska's getting crowded with dead people. Do you reckon she could just be crazy? I mean, just getting folks killed for the hell of it?"

"The Benders killed for profit in Kansas. I'll allow that Kate Bender kills for reasons no sane person might consider important, but she, or whoever it was who sent for all those hired guns, must have some twisted reason."

"It's too bad they all died before they could talk."

"Yeah, I did some of it myself, so I can't fault Spike or Pop for not aiming lower."

"What was the shooting about last night? Me and Goldie heard it from our bedroom."

That took care of Goldie. He hadn't thought she was that sore at him, anyway.

He said, "I can't say. I heard the shots too. But I've no idea who it was with that scattergun."

"It sure sounded like they were after something. It was too late and dark outside for kid stuff."

Longarm said something noncommittal, and turned to leave.

David asked, "Are you still staying over with Peggy in Pop's house?"

For a man who didn't know what was going on in his own bedroom, he was sure up on local gossip.

Longarm said, "No, I'm riding out to what's left of the church settlement, after supper. I figured I'd poke about to see if I missed anything. Then I'll camp there and be ready to leave bright and early in the morning."

"You mean you're giving up on the Terrible Benders?"

"No, but my boss is. You read his telegram. I don't like it much, but he has a point, you know. Nobody's ever caught them in all these years, and I'm not being paid to settle down here permanent. If they got away again, they got away again."

"But, damn it, who's going to be the law here, if you ride out after Pop's been killed?"

"Can't say. It ain't a federal matter. Pop's deputy, Clanton, may want the job. It'll be up to you folks to elect somebody. You ain't living on an army post or an Indian reservation, so you don't rate federal lawmen."

He left with the clerk still protesting, and went next door to the saloon, where he bellied up to the bar and told much the same tale to the men assembled to mourn the dead in a less formal manner.

Spike bought Longarm a drink and offered his own suggestion. He said, "I've been thinking on all that's happened, and it seems to me someone has been trying to stir up trouble."

"That sounds reasonable, Spike."

"Now don't you go grinning at me, Longarm. Miss Victoria and Colonel Claymore has been enemies for years, and everyone hereabouts has been expecting a real free-for-all range war."

"Make your point, old son."

"My point is that neither Miss Victoria nor the colonel is crazy enough to start anything serious. I mean, sure, me and the boys has maybe tore up some fencing or tipped over an outhouse in the past. I stomped hell out of the Rocking K's top hand last summer. But we never did anything really *mean*."

"How's the Rocking K taken your joyous outbursts, up to now, Spike?"

"The same way. They stampeded our herd one time as we was fixing to drive it to market. One time I found one of our windmills busted and the tank shot full of holes and empty. But nobody started acting really *ugly* till all these damned strangers started drifting in."

Longarm nodded and said, "The church of whatever seems to be sort of busted up and scattered to the winds. Even when they were in business, they struck me as harmless dreamers."

"Hell, everybody knows they was harmless, Longarm. But it was all the strange *faces* you had to worry about. Until lately, you could spy a rider on a distant ridge and make an educated guess who he rode for."

Longarm nodded thoughtfully. "I see what you mean, Spike. It's sort of hard to bushwhack a hand when everybody in the neighborhood knows everybody else."

"That's what I'm getting at. You take those two gunslicks I shot the other night. A year ago, I'd have wondered right off who two strange faces sitting in a corner might belong to. Between outsiders squatting all about, and others coming to look into what they was doing here, it got hard to keep track. I don't remember thinking about them strangers one way or the other, till I noticed they was out to shoot somebody. Had I thought at all, I'd have figured they worked with you, or for the Land Office, or maybe the Indian agency. You start a spanking new town in the middle of nowhere, and the Lord knows who-all may be drifting in or out. Hell, they could have been anybody!"

Longarm saw that their glasses were empty and held up two fingers to the barkeep. Then he said, "I can see where it would spook you to be distracted from your old familiar feud. Do you think the other side lured those dreamers out here to muddy the waters for a serious shoot-out?"

Spike pondered this and said, "I don't think so. Fair is fair. Old Claymore thinks his shit don't stink, and he's mean. But he ain't dumb. He'd be the first one suspected if any Diamond M riders got hurt enough to matter. Just like everyone would think it was us, if somebody blew him or anybody working for him down."

Longarm shrugged, downed his drink, and said the whole mess was beyond him. He left the boys at the bar to work it out, and went back to the store to thumb

through some more ledgers and maybe have supper with Peggy before he rode out to the abandoned Gateway settlement.

Peggy said the store wasn't open on Sunday, but she was open to other suggestions, so they went to bed to kill the rest of the day.

It sure beat reading as a way to pass the time.

As the sun went down, Longarm was sitting on an empty box just inside the circus tent the church members had left erected at the abandoned commune. He didn't see the sunset; the sky was acting up again. But his Ingersoll said it was sunset time, and it started getting even darker, so he figured the watch must be right.

The canvas hung dead still, despite the coiling clouds overhead, and with the Gateway deserted, it was quiet as a graveyard.

In a way, it was a graveyard now. He'd searched all the deserted cabins when he'd first ridden in, and he'd found the grave of Brother Seth. Someone had left a mason jar of flowers on the mound of bare sand. They'd be wilted in a day or so, but it wouldn't matter. Nobody lived here now but ghosts and dreams. In a few days—or even sooner if the wind picked up—this big tent would be down. The locals would come out during the work week to salvage any lumber they could use, and some outfit was sure to claim the canvas. Anything left would be cleared in time by riders from surrounding spreads, to keep a calf from ripping itself up. The grass would grow again where Utopia had failed once more to pan out.

A horse nickered in the gathering dusk and a female voice called out, "Longarm?"

He snuffed out his cheroot and called back, "Over here, in the tent."

Victoria Roundtree rode into view around a deserted cabin. She reined in near the tent and slid from her sidesaddle, dropping the reins in the grass for her obedient pony. She was wearing a velvet outfit the color of dying roses, and her blonde hair was tied up

under a little veiled hat. She walked over and stopped in the doorway to peer uncertainly in at him. She said, "I heard you were bedded down out here. Why have you been avoiding me?"

He said, "I've been busy."

She smiled bitterly, and said, "I noticed. But I don't seem to have a rival out *here*, at least. Unless you aim to spend the night with Kate Bender or some other ghost."

"I didn't know old Kate was dead, Vickie. She looked all right when I saw her in this very tent the other night."

"Oh, come on, it was some sort of trick. One of those spiritualists must have worn a mask or something."

He nodded and said, "I thought of that. But trick or not, somebody killed a man out here. You'd better go home, Vickie. It ain't safe out here."

"But everybody's left, honey."

"The squatters have left. Brother Seth was killed before he could get around to telling me who lured him and the others out here with promises and spooky tricks."

She came closer and chose a seat of her own on another empty box before she said, "Spike told me his idea about someone wanting to cause trouble. I think you're both making things more complicated than they really were. Those crazy people just wandered in, got in trouble with the Land Office, and now they've gone someplace else."

"What was Kate Bender here for, then?"

"Don't ask me. And before you get really silly, would you like to come back to my spread to see my birth certificate?"

He laughed and said, "I know what you'd show me at your house, Vickie. I wired Penn State and had them look you up. You were born where you said you were. You went to school in Harrisburg and got good marks, too."

She laughed and said, "That's not fair. Now you know how old I am. But if you won't come home with

me, where's your bedroll? It wouldn't be the first night we spent in it, you know."

He said, "It's tied behind my saddle, outside. I wasn't figuring on turning in just yet."

She leaned forward, a hurt look just visible on her face in the gloom, as she asked, "What's happened to us? Have I done anything to upset you since we rode all those lovely days and nights alone together?"

He shrugged and said, "We haven't talked much since we got here."

"Damn it, that's hardly *my* fault! she replied a bit angrily. "You've avoided me since we got to Sunbonnet and you know it! I know we never got engaged or anything, but you've been cruel as hell, even for a love-'em-and-leave-'em man!"

He grinned sheepishly, and said, "I know. I ought to be tarred and feathered, the way I treat my women. I've been told that more than once."

"Are you trying to tell me we're through? You'd rather spend the night out here in a tent, with a storm front coming at you, than with me in a feather bed?"

"Hell, you know I'd rather be with you than a twister in the dark. I ain't out here for pleasure, Vickie. I'm here to meet somebody."

"Oh? Another girl you've been at is riding out here to spend the night with you?"

"Not exactly. Brother Seth said this was a haunted place, where the universes come together funny. I was wondering, now that there's so few folks about to mess up the ectoplasm, if I might not meet up with a spook or two."

She laughed uncertainly. "You're trying to frighten me. You don't believe in that spiritualist bull!"

"I ain't sure what I believe. But it sure gets spooky out here at night. I don't know if it's the way those rocks bounce the echoes when it thunders, or if someone aims to play some trick. But I've got a funny feeling I can't explain, Vickie. Can't you sort of *feel* the way it is out here?"

As if his words had been heard, there came a distant mutter of thunder and Victoria said, "Stop it!

You're giving me gooseflesh! It's dark as hell, and the storm is almost on us."

"I know. Why don't you ride on home? If I get through the night, I'll drop by before I leave Sunbonnet."

She made as if to rise. Then she said, "I'd never make it home before the storm broke. Can't I stay with you?"

"Well, it's your funeral. But if things start to happen, I want you to promise you'll flatten out and stay put while I deal with it. Did you bring a gun?"

She nodded and pulled up her skirt, saying, "I've a .32 strapped to my ankle."

He said, "Handy, riding sidesaddle. But remember, if anything happens, you're to let me handle it."

"And if nothing happens?"

"I'll be disappointed one way, but we'll make it up to one another if I'm wrong."

She laughed and said, "That's better. How long do we have to wait before we can get down to more earthly matters?"

"Oh, I'd say if nothing happens this side of midnight, the place ain't haunted after all."

"You're on! If the Terrible Benders or their ghosts don't turn up by midnight, I'll expect you to treat me right."

"Cut it out," he said. "You're getting me hot, and it's early yet. Maybe we'd better move farther in."

They rose, and he moved the boxes deep inside the dark, empty tent.

As she sat down again, there was an odd, whimpering sound and she asked, "What was that?"

Longarm said, "Don't know. Wind must be picking up. I'd better go out and bring the critters in. There's more than enough room in here. It's big enough to be a cave."

She said she'd go with him, but Longarm said, "No. If there's someone creeping about out there, it's best I meet up with him, her, or *it* by myself. You can't stay with me if you're going to move about. I have to know where you're at if there's any trouble."

He left her alone in the tent as he went out to gather in the mounts. He led them inside and tethered them to a tent post near the entrance as she came to join him, saying, "I heard it again. Let's get out of here. You're right. It's spooky as hell out here at night!"

He said, "You probably heard the tent ropes complaining. I looked around outside. There's nobody here but us."

Before she could answer, there was a flash of lightning and it started to rain. He said, "There you go. The storm's hit. What you heard was just the wind."

"Can't we have a light in here? I can hardly see a thing."

"I aim to keep it that way," he answered. "Nobody can draw a bead on us if they can't see us."

"Then let's spread the roll and cuddle together. We don't have to do anything just yet. I'm spooked, just sitting here in the dark."

"What are you afraid of, Vickie? You just told me you don't believe in haunts."

"I don't, but you say you saw Kate Bender out here, and nobody saw her leaving with the others. I know she's just a woman, but they say she killed all those people in Kansas, and she slickered you the other night!"

He sat down beside her as he said, "Yeah, I've been studying on how she could have done it, too. I know this sounds crazy, but I've wondered, some, if she might not have *real* powers."

"I'm sure she used some simple trick. You just haven't figured it out yet."

He said, "Maybe. I read this funny story, one time, about a man who dabbled in black magic. You see, he *thought* he was just fooling folks. He thought he was in control of his talking trumpets and luminous paint. But the devil, or the spirits, or maybe the Lord—Well, it was only a story."

"What happened? Why did you stop?"

"Oh, it was sort of spooky the way the spirits started acting, and you're right. It's gloomy in this dark old tent, with the rain tapping down like that. Next

thing you know, we'll start scaring ourselves into seeing things, like kids in a haunted house."

"Oh, come on. What happened to the spiritualist in that story?"

"Hell, I told you it was only a made-up yarn. Things like that can't happen in real life."

"*What* can't happen, damn it? Did you hear that? It sounded like . . . like somebody crying, out in the wind, far away!"

He shrugged and said, "Loose shingle, most likely. This fake spiritualist must have wondered, sometimes, whether there was anything to the stuff he peddled. It must have been his own guilty conscience that caught up with him in the end."

"Stop skirting around and tell me, Longarm. What caught up with him?"

"Oh, one night, in the middle of a seance, a real spook showed up. It must have surprised him some. His hair turned white overnight, and he ended up in a lunatic asylum, afraid to sleep in the dark."

She sounded relieved as she asked, "Is that all? I thought you were going to say the devil came to drag him off to hell or something."

"Well, he hadn't ever done anything really bad. He just trifled with magic. He never really sinned enough to *rile* the spirits. I'm glad I ain't Kate Bender. Now *there's* someone the hidden powers would be interested in, if they're interested in anyone at all. Of course, you and me know its a lot of nonsense. If there was anything to this spiritualist stuff, the spooks would have come for her years ago."

She shuddered and said, "Ugh. Let's talk about something else. Listen to it blow out there! It sounds just like a lost child, doesn't it?"

He started to say something about the wind in loose shingles again. Then they both heard it: a high, tinny voice calling out, "Daddy? Where are you, Daddy? I don't like it here."

She gasped, "My God, it *is* some kid!"

He said, "Quiet! I heard. It's some sort of trick. It *has* to be some kind of trick!"

Then Victoria whispered, "Look! Over there in the corner!"

Longarm said, "Steady. It's a moonbeam through a hole in the canvas or something."

She stammered, "There's no moon! It's . . . it's some kind of light, and it's in here *with* us!

He told her to be still, and as they both watched, the almost invisible blur of light began to grow into something the size and shape of a child.

He called out, "Who's there? We see you, damn it! State your name and business or I'll blow a hole in you!"

The quavering voice called back, "Daddy? I can't see you, but I see the people who hurt us, and I don't want them to kill me again."

Then the blurred features of the ghostly image began to clear, and Victoria screamed, "No! Dear God, no! It's not possible!"

The image was that of a child whose face had rotted away. But she seemed to be looking at them with her empty eye sockets as she said, "I don't know you, sir. But that's the lady who hurt my daddy and me!"

Then Victoria had her gun out and was shooting.

She fired five rounds into the figure and was backing away, her hammer snapping on spent casings, as the dead child said, "You see? She keeps killing me and killing me. Why do you keep killing me, Miss Kate? My daddy and me never did anything to you."

Longarm called out, "That's enough. Simmer down, Kate Bender, and we'll talk about it without that loaded gun up your skirt."

But the woman was running, screaming, for the entrance. Longarm thought she'd head for her pony, so he made the wrong move to catch up as she ran out into the storm. He swore and followed her, calling out, "It's no use, Kate. Give it up. There's no place left for you to run to!"

He ran out into the heavy rain and looked around for her. There was a flash of lightning, and he spotted her running toward Hunter's Rock.

As he started after her, a dark blur detached itself

from the shadows of the tent and blossomed gunfire at him, so Longarm knew it was no friend of his as he fired back twice, saw that he'd jackknifed the man in the wet grass, and put a third round into him for luck as he ran past.

The diversion had given Kate Bender a lead on him, and he saw that it could get serious as he followed her up the slope. The whole charade had been to get her to expose herself while spotting any hidden weapons. If she had time to reload, he faced a possible shoot-out with a woman and, mass murderess or not, he wasn't up to gunning a gal if he could help it.

He got to the base of the rocks and peered up into the downpour, not seeing a damned thing. Then, as he started up, every hair on him tingled and the sky turned chalk white as a lightning bolt crashed against the wet granite above him. He knew he was asking to be electrocuted as he kept climbing. Hunter's Rock was the highest object for miles around, and as a second bolt hit, he knew that lightning struck the same place every chance it got!

Then something rolled down the rock face at him, and he just had time to get out of its way as it landed near him with an ugly thud. Another bolt split open the sky and winked out, but not before he'd seen a sight he'd never forget. The bolt that had hit her had torn off the velvet dress, cooked her red as a baked ham, and split her down one side like she'd been struck with a red-hot cleaver.

He gagged and turned away before the next flash lit up the night. As he was almost to the tent, he heard Peggy calling out to him and he yelled back, "Get back under cover, honey. It's over."

But she ran to cling to him, soaked to the skin, as she gasped, "Spike Logan's over near the tent. Dead."

He said, "I know. I killed him. I might have known she'd have one of them backing her play. They figured to get me with my pants down and my mind on something else."

She said, "I know. I was listening like you told me. I didn't know you'd made love to Kate Bender."

"Neither did I, at the time. Let's get inside and dry out some. I'll light a fire. By the time this storm blows over, we'll be able to ride back to town without catching consumption."

They went back into the tent, and as Longarm built a small fire of scrap lumber, Peggy gathered the things they'd brought from the store and piled them all together in one place.

She looked down at the magic lantern as she marveled, "I never thought it would fool them when you told me what I was to do. I thought she used a telephone speaker and a magic lantern in her own fake spirit seances."

He said, "She did, and it was spooky as hell. Most folks have never heard how funny a voice sounds over wire, and the projected image on the tent wall was ghostly enough with just a plain face. The advantage we had was that they didn't know *we* could play the same sort of tricks. Like I told her, folks have to half-believe in magic to be so interested in it in the first place."

Peggy grimaced. "It was awful, even with me shining the picture of that dead child you had, and playing like I was her on the battery-powered speaker. I know you showed the picture to me when you took it from your saddlebags to trim to shape. But seeing that poor murdered child, full-sized in the dark, was horrid."

"It worked, and you played your part like a born actress. We make a good team, honey."

She started peeling off her outer garments to dry them as she said, "I still don't understand how Victoria Roundtree could have been Kate Bender. Her picture on the wanted poster has been on Pop's wall for years, and they looked not at all alike."

He said, "I know. The way I figure it, the Benders got away in Kansas because of that. They only had a description of most of them. The men were supposed to grunt like pigs and shamble like apes. So that threw the posse off."

"You mean it was an act?"

"It had to be. Pa Bender had a homestead and

ran a business. He might have been crazy-mean, but he had to have at least common sense. I looked that up by wire. He left contracts and such filed with the county clerk's office. We already knew Kate had at least a high school education. She wrote her own advertisements for her spiritualist and fortune-telling act in the papers. They were well-written, if you leave out the nonsense about her being a mind reader and such."

"But the picture of her, on the reward posters . . ."

"It wasn't her. She'd made her hair darker in her younger days, maybe to look gypsy-like and mysterious. She was a mite taller than most gals, so when they described her as tall and dark, folks added details. Everyone knew Kate had a boyfriend in Cherryvale, so the outraged posse beat him up, put a rope around his neck, and said they'd treat him even rougher if he didn't help them catch her. The man might have been out to help her, but more likely, he was just scared. He had to produce something better than a mess of don't-knows, so he gave them a picture he said was Kate. He probably cut it from a theatrical poster. If you'd like an educated guess, it was the picture of a pretty actress playing Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* back East. That's one of the things that always bothered me about the Bender case. The sweet little thing in that picture just never looked to me like a six-foot murderess."

Peggy shuddered and said, "Victoria was sort of hard-looking, but I never would have suspected her of murder."

"She was mean to horses, too. As to her killing folks, she'd wised up a mite since her earlier days. I'd say she killed Roundtree, her husband. He died conveniently, right after she married him. The Sioux got blamed for it. Anybody with a strong stomach can use a scalping knife, but the Cheyenne sign was a neat touch."

She asked, "Who was Spike? Her brother?"

He shrugged and said, "He might have been. Junior Bender was the dumbest of the bunch, and almost got them caught in Kansas. Since then, Kate's had time

to teach him, and I must say, Spike was getting better. He said and did whatever she told him to."

"But he killed those men who were gunning for you!"

Longarm shook his head. "He killed two disposable hired guns before I could get around to talking to them. You see, when Kate was spotted by Deputy Harcourt on her way to Denver on business and they had to kill him, they decided to change the rules of the game. They knew I'd be coming, once Harcourt was murdered, so they flim-flammed me into turning over the wrong rocks while they covered their tracks. They didn't want me dead, at first. They wanted me to report that I'd seen the fake Kate Bender. That's why she used Brother Seth to convince me I'd seen her. She projected a copy of the old, useless photograph, so I'd not study Victoria Roundtree too closely. But of course, I did. So they started playing for keeps."

She nodded, but she'd been to college, so she was used to using her head. She said, "Wait a minute. They shot Flo in your place *before* they tried to fool you with the magic lantern!"

He looked sheepishly down at the fire and said, "That was Kate being jealous. She knew who she was shooting. She didn't decide to have me killed until I started getting warm with my questions to Brother Seth. They killed him to shut him up. Sooner or later, I'd have gotten more out of him. They had hidden telephone recievers and whatever all over this layout, so they knew I wasn't in his cabin when they blew him up. I was supposed to wire in a totally confusing report before they sicked those last guns on me."

"Oh, dear. That's when they got Pop. You know, I sort of miss him. He was kind to me and, well, a woman always feels something, even if she's only taking pleasure as she finds it."

He cocked his head toward the tent opening. "The storm's letting up. We'd better study getting back to town and reporting some of this to the doc so he can write it down."

"I sure wouldn't want to spend the rest of the night

here, with those two lying dead outside. I'm ready to leave whenever you are. Are you going to need me as a witness?" she asked.

He nodded, then said, "Let's eat the apple a bite at a time, honey. There's innocent folks with innocent feelings involved. I have to see if I can wrap it up gentle."

As he helped her to her feet, she said, "Oh, that's right. There were *four* Benders, aside from extra help they may have hired! Do you know who the father and mother are?"

He said, "I've got some ideas, and a few more details to work out. Let's get you home and dry in bed."

She said, "Oh, I'd like that. You don't have to look for the rest of them tonight, do you?"

He said, "No. There's nothing that can't wait till sunup."

She said, "You're wrong. I can't wait to get you home with me."

Chapter 11

In the morning, over ham and eggs, Longarm swore Peggy to secrecy, explaining, "I told you last night I had some details to work out. I only told Doc Sawyer there were two dead folks out there. I aim to leave your name out of the final report, if I can."

She nodded and said, "I understand. But I'd be willing to risk losing Pop's business if it meant helping you, darling."

He reached across the table to pat her hand as he said, "I know. But false inheritance isn't a federal offense, and there are other dangers to study on. Some of the Diamond M riders might get cross with us, and while I'm free to ride out before I have to gun an innocent hand, you ain't. I mean to take care of my friends in Sunbonnet before I leave. Reports can be bent a mite, as long as justice is done."

She looked away and said, "I wish I was leaving with you."

He didn't answer, so she smiled gallantly and added, "Don't worry, dear. I understand some things just can't be. I won't try to hold you to anything you may have said in bed last night."

He sighed and answered, "A man ain't necessarily lying when he says things to a face next to his on a pillow, Peg. It's the cold gray dawn that makes liars of us all."

"Damn it, I said I understand."

"Then understand this: I like you. I aim to leave here knowing you are safe and well off. So you weren't with me when Kate Bender gave herself away; you don't know how Spike got shot; you were home in bed."

"Then how are you going to prove anything, with-

out a witness? I thought all those tricks we played were to frighten her into a damaging admission."

"They were, and had I taken her alive, I'd have needed your statement to convict her. Now that she's dead, I won't. I don't even have to prove she was Kate Bender. She was struck by lightning. It was an act of God, so nobody has to answer for it. As for my shooting Spike, he shot at me first. So whether he was Junior Bender or just crazy-mad at a lawman he found alone with a gal he liked is unimportant."

She shook her head in wonder as she marveled, "Good Lord, you sure have odd ideas on enforcing the law."

"I'm a peace officer; I ain't a judge. As long as I leave folks at peace and safe from further harm, I figure justice has been done. You let me worry about just how to wrap up the case. I've some chores to do right now."

She followed him to the door to kiss him goodbye. But before he could get away, she demanded, "How did your friend, the dead deputy, recognize Kate when he bumped into her on that train?"

He'd been afraid she'd ask that. So he chose his words carefully before he said, "Harcourt didn't recognize her and Junior from the reward posters; he knew them personally. They came from the same town, back East. Harcourt was just a kid when Kate was the local belle. So when he heard about what happened after they moved west to Kansas . . ."

"Oh, it's so simple, once it's explained."

"So is any shell game. We naturally figured Harcourt was talking about the reward posters when he wired that he'd seen Kate and Junior. It only came to me how it must have happened after I got more details on Harcourt and remembered where Victoria had said she hailed from. She left out the detour to Kansas, but Spike let it slip that he came from there. The killing he admitted to in Wichita was legal. He never saw fit to brag about the others in Cherryvale."

"They must have been moral monsters. Just what was it they were up to here in Sunbonnet? They had

the Diamond M. What did she want with hired guns and those crazy people she fooled into thinking she was Catherine the Great?"

He said, "We'll talk about it later. I promised to spend one last night with you before I have to ride out, remember?"

"Do be careful, darling."

He said he aimed to be and left, feeling a hurt in his gut. There had to be some way to spare her. He still felt disgusted as hell to think of himself making love to a mass murderess and a lunatic. He was a man. He was tough. What was it going to do to Peg when she learned the nice old man who'd taken her in and been her kindly lover was really Old Man Bender, the daddy of the whole murderous clan?

He went to the telegraph office and found it still closed. He looked at his watch and wondered why. It was Monday morning, and almost everything else was open.

He went to the saloon to wait the telegrapher out, and met Doc Sawyer and some others there. Doc came over to him and said, "We found them like you said we would. Miss Victoria struck by lightning, and Spike with three bullets in him. Any one of them would have killed him. I've got them at the embalmers, but I'm sort of missing some details. What in hell *happened* out there?"

Longarm said, "My investigation ain't over, Doc. You'll get a copy of my official report, once I sort out a few details."

"For Christ's sake, you might at least give us a few hints! Some of the Diamond M riders are all prodded up for a war, and I can't even tell them who they're after!"

"Tell them it's official that nobody riding for the Rocking K did it. Oh, and tell them a lot of folks have worked hard as hell to get both sides to fighting. Maybe they'll cool down if they know riders on both sides of the feud have been used by outlaws."

"Good God! You mean the Terrible Benders every-

one keeps jawing about were responsible for all these deaths?"

Longarm nodded and said, "Yep. That's not far off the mark. Nobody would have died if the Benders hadn't tried to improve their twisted games they liked to play on folks."

Longarm knew he was getting dangerously close to lying to an elected official, so he swallowed his drink and got out of there before it could get worse.

He went back to the Western Union office. It was still closed. He knew where David lived, and he had a mess of wires to get off. So he walked up the street to see what was holding up the parade.

He had no reason to be creeping through the backyard, so he opened the front gate and walked right up to the front door. He knocked and waited, then he noticed they had one of those newfangled doorbells you turned with a key. He gave the key a good twist, and he could hear the tinkle of the chimes in the hall behind the door. He waited some more and nobody came.

He started to give it up. But then he frowned and muttered, "Where in hell could they have gone? It ain't like there's an amusement park in Sunbonnet!"

Goldie, he knew only too well, could be almost anywhere with anybody, tearing off some sneaky love. But it was a work day, and her husband belonged at his telegraph key. If he was sick, Doc Sawyer would have known about it.

Longarm went around to the back to see if they were having breakfast late and maybe hadn't heard the bell. He mounted the back steps and rapped on the door. Nothing. All he got for his troubles was an echo somewhere in the house.

He shrugged and, again, decided to leave. Then he looked down.

Most people would have missed it. The brown trickle had flowed under one corner of the door and followed a crack in the boards. It could have been the spilled tomato sauce of a careless housekeeper, but Longarm had seen blood before.

He swore softly and fished out his jackknife to pick the lock. Then he drew his gun and shoved the door open. It shoved hard because something was on the kitchen floor behind it. The air inside smelled of gunsmoke, and as he leaned his weight against the door and looked down, he saw that the painted planks were slick with blood. He stepped gingerly over it into the kitchen for a look at what he'd been shoving across the floor. It was Colonel Claymore. He lay facedown, with three bullet holes in his summer-weight riding coat.

Longarm said, " 'Morning, you stupid bastard! Let's see what other trouble you caused here!"

He knew where the bedroom was, and it seemed the logical place to start, considering. He went in, and there she was, half in and half out of her kimono, thrown across the bed like a rag doll by the bullet she'd taken in her curly blonde head. A gob of hair, blood, and brains was stuck to the wallpaper near the window. He found the brains a mite surprising. He'd sort of thought her pretty skull was filled with sawdust, like other painted dolls.

He wondered if he couldn't quit right there. Shooting your wife and her lover wasn't a federal matter, and the longer it took the town to find out, the longer the lead David would have.

But a lawman couldn't cover up a double murder. He could maybe disremember things like a lady inviting him to bed; he could keep his mouth shut if others put things together wrong; but he had to go through the usual routine, and he had to report the deaths.

So he walked casually through the other rooms, hoping he wouldn't find anything too obvious to overlook. He found the telegrapher in the dining room.

David had gone to the sideboard after shooting his wife and Claymore. There, he'd built himself a healthy drink or two from the cut-glass decanter on the sideboard. Then, with his nerves under control, or under the influence, he'd finished it the only way he knew how.

He lay on his back between the dining table and the

sideboard, with half of his head blown away. The recoil had sent the big Dragoon he'd used across the waxed floor to a far corner. He hadn't left a note, but Longarm didn't need one to see how it had happened.

David had been later than usual leaving for work, or he'd forgotten something and come back for it. Claymore had ridden in for an early start, and the husband had caught them. The colonel was still dressed, so David must have caught them before they really mounted up for their morning ride. It hadn't helped. Finding your wife half-naked in another man's arms would be sort of jarring, whether he had his pants on or not. From the cold fury Longarm read in the signs, it looked like David had been suspecting more than she'd allowed he did. That Dragoon was a serious thing for casual wear, and David had been pathetically eager to tell everyone how much his wife still loved him.

"You poor bastard," Longarm said to the corpse, "why couldn't you have just handed the little tramp a quarter for past services rendered, and walked out on her?"

He didn't get a sensible answer; he hadn't expected one. So he swallowed the green taste in his mouth, and let himself out the front door. There seemed no point in locking it after him.

He strode down to the saloon, where he found Doc and the others still pondering whether to go to work or not over their morning eye-openers. He bellied up to the bar beside Doc and said, "I just came from David's place. You'd best finish your drink and have a look."

"Is somebody sick up there, Longarm?"

"Not hardly. You'll be calling in your official capacity as the coroner. I just found three more for you to certify."

Despite Longarm's suggestion and the fact that there seemed to be no hurry, Doc Sawyer left his drink on the bar and tore up the street, yelling. Some of the others lit out after him. So Longarm had his own

eye-opener, lit a cheroot, and moseyed up the walk after everybody. He knew they'd have some fool questions for him.

Half the town seemed to have beaten him to Dave's house by the time he strolled up the front steps and through the gaping door. He went into the parlor and sat down.

Parson Meeker spotted him there as he was leaving and called in, "They're all dead! Sawyer says they died of gunshot wounds!"

Longarm nodded and replied, "Doc's pretty smart, so he must be right."

The parson left to make his own arrangements. Business in the churchyard had sure picked up lately.

He'd almost finished his smoke when Doc Sawyer, Deputy Clanton, and some hardcase-looking cowhands joined Longarm in the front room.

Doc said, "Longarm, this is Nichols from the Diamond M and Hank Peters from the Rocking K. The boys have joined forces, and we're forming a posse to track the bastardly crew down!"

Longarm had no idea what the coroner was talking about, but he nodded and said, "I'll ride with you."

The other men exchanged glances. Then Clayton said, "Uh, we'd rather you didn't, Longarm. No offense, but you work out of the federal courts, and we don't aim to be so formal when we catch the Terrible Benders."

Longarm blinked and asked, "You think David, his wife, and the colonel were done in by the Benders, Doc?"

Sawyer nodded and asked, "Isn't it obvious? It's another bloodbath, just like the one in Kansas! Last night they must have killed Spike and Miss Victoria when the two of them rode out to the deserted village for a look around."

"Uh, Victoria Roundtree was struck by lightning, Doc."

Sawyer nodded enthusiastically. "Sure she was. She was running for her life after Spike went down trying to

defend her. Then you came out, as curious as they were, and that's when you found them, right?"

Longarm hesitated. Then he said, "Yeah, it could work that way."

The small-town coroner prattled on, pleased with his own stupidity, as he explained, "The Terrible Benders knew the game was up and that you and Clanton were getting warm. So they came back here to town to get something, maybe cash for the road. David ran the Western Union office, so he must have had money here in the house to cash money orders. We only found a few dollars among the three dead bodies, so they must have gotten David's real money before he surprised them or something. The murdering bastards killed David and Goldie. The colonel must have been passing by, heard the shots, and rushed in to see what was happening."

The Rocking K rider's face was grim as he said, "Our boss never had a chance. They shot him in the back. I was just telling Doc that the colonel was friends with David and Goldie. She came out to our spread a few times with cakes she'd baked for us."

The Diamond M rider nodded and said, "You can see how we'd like to do it our way, Longarm. Our two outfits might have funned each other in the past, but what happened last night was *serious*. Both outfits are in this, side by side, till the goddamned murderers are caught! We don't need the services of a U.S. deputy. Clanton, here, is good enough for us. We just need to track them. We see no need for trials and such."

Longarm managed to keep a straight face as he mused aloud, "I can see how some things would be hard as hell to prove to a judge and jury, and once an outlaw's dead, it seems a waste of time to nitpick on the tax payers' time."

The others beamed at him and Clanton said, "Hot damn! I told you he was a good old boy!"

Longarm said, "I still have to fill out some sort of fool report. Just who the hell do you gents think the Benders were pretending to be?"

Clanton said, "It wasn't anybody we knew as neighbors, Longarm. We haven't found anything suspicious about anyone we know. Nobody from Sunbonnet answers to the descriptions on the reward posters. And you *saw* Kate Bender out there in that tent, right?"

Longarm nodded and replied cautiously, "That's true. I spoke with her in the flesh."

"There you go, then. They've been skulking about, mixed up with all the strangers we've had here lately. With those church folks finished and gone, it's gotten too hot for them and they've lit out. But we'll get them sure, this time. There's no place they can hide this side of the state line!"

Another man nudged Clanton and asked, "Speaking of catching up with the Benders, shouldn't we be doing the same instead of jawing about it?"

Clanton nodded and said, "Right. Let's go, boys. We'll pick up some other hands as we ride out after the rascals!"

The budding posse stomped and clanked their way out on their mission of vengeance, but Longarm saw that Doc Sawyer wasn't riding with them. The tall lawman rose to his feet and said, "I can see you have to finish your investigation, Doc. Will you be needing me for anything?"

Doc said, "I'll want you to sign a statement telling how you found the bodies."

"Don't that make me a suspect, Doc?"

"Hell, we all know you were with us in the saloon a few minutes earlier, and the neighbors heard no gunshots this morning. The only time it could have happened was last night, during the thunderstorm. From the condition of all three cadavers, I can tell you they were killed at least twelve or more hours ago."

Longarm nodded as he realized he didn't know everything. Now that he reconsidered, he could see that David hadn't left early. He'd come home early Sunday night, probably from some fool's errand Goldie had sent him on to be alone with her lover. He hadn't caught them starting; he'd caught the colonel leaving *afterwards*. But the details didn't matter. Three reputa-

tions had been saved by Doc's clumsy forensic work.

Longarm knew he shouldn't ask, but it was like trying not to probe a bad tooth with your tongue. He said, "If the folks were killed here at about midnight, Spike and Miss Victoria must have been killed around the same time, out at the deserted settlement."

Sawyer frowned and said, "By gum, you're right. But we know there were at least four of them. Ma Bender may only be cooking and such for the clan, but they seem to have some sidekicks they've recruited since leaving Kansas . . . What the hell, why bother to figure what crazy folks do or don't do? The boys will get the details out of them before they string them all up!"

Longarm nodded but didn't answer as he turned to go.

The coroner took him by the elbow and lowered his voice as he asked, "Uh, Longarm?"

"Yeah?"

"In your official report to the Justice Department, do you have to include details like, well, rough justice?"

Longarm said, "I told you I'd see you got a copy, Doc. As to what I have to put in or don't have to put in, I'm undecided. I don't want to cause trouble for anyone who doesn't need punishing."

Sawyer sighed with relief and said, "I was hoping you'd see it like that. We've always had a nice friendly township here. Now that the rival spreads are working together, maybe things will be peaceful like they used to be."

"I've been thinking along those lines, Doc. As I was going over Pop's record books, I noticed that both the Roundtrees and the Claymores have distant relatives back East. Do you reckon they'll be welcome when they come West to claim their rightful inheritances?"

"Sure. The riders on both spreads have to work for somebody, and the feud seems to be over."

"Good. I couldn't find anyone related to Pop, aside from Peggy, so she'll carry on at the store. Will you see if you can help her get the job of postmistress?"

"Of course. Sunbonnet looks after its own, and Peg's

a sweet little thing. It's too bad she's so shy. She's sort of pretty, and a gal ought to have a man roped and branded before she gets old, like poor Flo."

"Peggy will likely get over her shy ways, now that she's the boss. By the way, I'll be at her place if you need me. I'm going to wire in my report and see if there's anything else they want me to do here before I ride out Tuesday morning."

"Oh, in that case, the boys may have news of the Benders by the time you leave. But how can you wire anybody, with the Western Union man dead in the next room?"

Longarm said, "I aim to send a message to Western Union first of all, telling them what happened to their agent. I don't think they'll mind if I send a few wires of my own. I learned how to send Morse code in the army."

Doc nodded and said, "In that case, would you mind sending a bulletin on the latest crimes of the Terrible Benders? Between you and me, I'm not sure Clanton's any better than that sheriff in Kansas might have been, and we don't want them slipping away again."

As Longarm positioned his Stetson on his head, he observed soberly, "It won't hurt the cause of justice if every lawman west of the Big Muddy keeps his eyes open for the next few days. I'll put it on the wire that the Sunbonnet coroner's office wants them."

Western Union was pretty neighborly about it when he wired them that he'd broken into their office to explain what had happened. They told him to make himself right at home, and offered to carry any messages connected with their murdered agent free of charge. So Longarm tapped out a bulletin warning every lawman to be on the lookout for the Terrible Benders, and he chuckled as he thought how many drifting outlaws were liable to be caught in the dragnet. He saw no need to complicate matters with new descriptions, since all the Benders were dead or accounted for, and couldn't hurt anybody anymore.

His report to the Denver office took a mite more

care. He didn't want to lie to his superiors, exactly; he simply wanted to wrap the damned mess up and get out of here. So he may have left a few things out. He knew how many days and weeks might be tied up in a full disclosure, and even if he could manage not to expose a lot of dirty linen that had nothing to do with the owlhoots who'd already caused so much pain to innocent bystanders, he knew what a time he'd have proving most of his allegations. A lot of lawmen were likely to feel foolish as hell if it came out they'd been chasing a theatrical photograph of the wrong woman all these years, and they'd make him go over it more than once.

He was sending free of charge, but he worded it tersely and explained that he'd be out of the office most of the day and would be standing by for an answer just before quitting time in Denver.

Then he went across to Peggy's store. She had to stay open for business, so they couldn't spend the afternoon the way they would have liked to.

Longarm figured it was just as well. As the clock on the wall ticked off the last hours they'd ever share together, Peggy started getting wistful. He distracted her by giving her good advice as he helped her neaten up the store.

He told her not to study too hard on the triple killing up the street, and when she asked how he knew Mr. Roundtree hadn't been killed by Indians, he made up a tale about having done some scouting for the army once. Peg was sharp as a tack, and if he'd told her Red Cloud's people hadn't moved into Nebraska on their warpath back in '76, the girl was sure to bring up her own folks' having been killed by the Indians. She already knew her father had been Pop's business partner and part owner of this store. But Pop, or Old Man Bender, was buried in hallowed ground, and it was best to let her remember him as her father's friend.

At four-thirty, he went back to the telegraph office, lit a smoke, and waited behind the counter for Billy Vail's wire. He smiled fondly at the telephone set on

Dave's desk, remembering how he'd found other kits and a couple of magic lanterns in Pop's store. He knew that was where Kate had gotten hers, and he was still pleased with how frightened the witch had been of her own tricks. He hadn't planned on killing Kate, of course. But the lightning bolt had been a godsend, and Longarm was a man who used every break to his advantage. Peg was relieved to know she didn't need to be his witness to a tricked confession, and she'd proven she could keep her mouth shut.

If she ever spilled the beans, of course, he'd catch holy hell from Billy Vail. But it would mean her losing the store and, what the hell, Billy chewed him out a lot anyway.

The telegraph key suddenly started dancing, and Longarm swung himself erect in the swivel chair to take down the message with a pencil. When it was finished, he read:

YOUR REPORT CONFUSING BUT COME HOME STOP I EXPECT FULL EXPLANATION TYPED IN TRIPLICATE ON MY DESK BEFORE WEEKEND STOP VAIL U S MARSHAL DENVER

Longarm chuckled, got up, and locked the door behind him as he left for the night.

Peggy had cooked him a damned fine supper, and they turned in early. Every time she started asking questions that last night, he made love to her some more. Before they knew it, they were both worn out.

He felt as if he could sleep a week, but he woke up just before dawn with Peggy's red hair spread across his chest. She'd been crying in her sleep, and his flesh was slicked with her tears. He moved gently, so as not to wake her, and dressed quietly in the cold gray light.

She looked pretty as a picture, lying there in nothing but her auburn hair and milk-white hide. Longarm gazed down wistfully at her as he strapped on his gun.

Then he whispered goodbye, and eased out of her bedroom and her life. He knew she'd feel hurt when she awoke to find him gone. It hurt him a mite, too. It always did. But that was the way it had to be.

Chapter 12

Longarm took his time riding back to Alliance, where he returned two out of three of the mounts he'd borrowed, and gave the sheriff an IOU for the pinto that had been shot out from under him.

He met a nice-looking lady on the train to Denver, but it didn't pan out. She was willing to let a stranger buy her oranges and soda pop from the candy butcher on the train, but she started acting like a schoolgirl when he managed to get her alone on the rear platform. He decided if he wanted to play kid games, he'd go find himself a kid. But he parted from her politely. The lady was pushing thirty, and might have taken the remark as unfriendly.

The second night after his return to Denver, Longarm was seated in a booth in the back room of the Black Cat, waiting for one of the barmaids to get off at midnight.

That's where Billy Vail caught up with him, away from the office.

The pudgy chief marshal eased himself down across from Longarm and said, "I figured I'd find you here, you slippery bastard."

Longarm looked innocent as he asked, "What's the matter, Billy? You look sort of annoyed with the world. Would you like a beer?"

Vail said, "I'm annoyed at you, and if you're buying, make it Maryland rye. I've been going over that damn fool report of yours."

Longarm motioned to a waiter and said, "I don't play a typewriter too well, chief. But I put down everything I thought was important."

The waiter came over and he ordered their drinks

before he added, "I left everything peaceful in Nebraska, Billy. Those settlers are off federal land, and the Land Office is satisfied with the job I did for them."

"Oh, yeah? What about the Terrible Benders?"

"You never sent me after the Benders, but if it's any consolation, there's no evidence that anyone named Bender is residing at the moment near Sunbonnet. Let Nebraska worry about them. It ain't our case."

Billy Vail waited until his drink was placed before him before he said, "God damn it, old son, you've handed in some crazy reports before, but this time you've outdone yourself. You've made yourself an official fool who delivered an eviction notice and just rode out with bodies piled up all over creation and a part-time coroner left in charge to sort it out."

"Doc Sawyer was picked by the folks up there, and they're satisfied with his findings."

"Come on, God damn it. I know you too well, Longarm. You wouldn't be sitting here looking so pleased about a job well done if you weren't holding out on me. What in hell really happened up there?"

Longarm shrugged and said, "I handed in my official report, Billy."

Vail smiled and said, "All right, let's make this unofficial, between two friends who've ridden together in the past."

Longarm narrowed his eyes and asked, "You'll settle for that, and not pester me about that damned typewriter, once you get me back to the office?"

"Mum's the word," Vail assured him. "I just want to get some sleep tonight."

Longarm took a sip of his own drink and said, "I can't prove half of what I'm going to tell you, and a lot of folks would be hurt needlessly if I could prove it. But I'll start back in Cherryvale, Kansas, and I'll stop when I come to the end."

He leaned back and said, "What happened in Kansas, years ago, was pretty much what everyone has always said happened. A Pennsylvania Dutch family moved out West and opened that store and rest stop. The old man was sly and tricky. His son Junior wasn't

too bright and just did as he was told, good or bad. His daughter Kate was imaginative and probably a little insane. Business wasn't good on the Osage Trail, and they had bills to pay. So they started robbing folks, and you know how that turned out."

"How in hell did they get away so slick?"

"They weren't slick, they were lucky. They just got scared and ran for their lives. They probably split up and lit out separately. That helped some. But what made it *seem* like magic was that everyone was imagining them as giant ogres for one thing, and they had a photograph of the wrong woman for another. Ma and Pa Bender headed north to Nebraska. Junior only had to get to another county and go to work as a cowhand, since they had no picture of him, and one big cuss looks like any other. Kate went back East to dabble in spiritualism and other con games. Remember, all this was back in the early seventies."

He stopped talking as another man came in and limped past them to take a solo seat in another booth. Longarm wondered idly how the hand had hurt his leg, but it wasn't his business, so he didn't ask.

Billy Vail said, "I still say at least one of the Bender men needed a keeper. I've never felt comfortable with the story of a sly, foxy family that simply swatted folks with sledgehammers."

Longarm nodded and said, "I've got two answers for that angle. Junior must have been under their control and, what the hell, if you're cold-blooded about killing, it doesn't matter if the killing is neat. As to the foxy part, we've been crediting them with more than they deserve. The trouble with trying to figure other folks out is that we give them rational motives we'd have ourselves. We try to find a sensible reason for everything others do. When you're dealing with half-crazy opportunists who play by ear and act mean for practice—"

Vail cut in, "I get your drift. Stick to the story."

"All right. Ma and Pa Bender were storekeepers, and they had money they'd stolen in Kansas. Nobody noticed an elderly, softspoken couple in a buckboard,

and they simply drifted into Sunbonnet and bought into a business. Pa Bender became 'good old Pop,' and I reckon he had his likable side. Most men do. His wife just died for no particular reason. She was getting on in years, and she'd led a worried life. Pop was lonesome and the heat had died down, so he sent for his mean kids. Junior, or Spike, got a job with the Diamond M and may have introduced his good-looking sister to Roundtree, his boss. Kate married up with Roundtree, calling herself Victoria."

"So they had it made. They settled in as part of the scenery while the law was looking for wild, shaggy ogres."

"They were still ogres. It just didn't show. When Red Cloud and George Armstrong Custer got into that argument back in '76, both Kate's husband and Pop's business partner and his wife were butchered by the Benders, and everybody thought it was the Indians. Kate made a pretty widow, and kind old Pop adopted the pretty young daughter of his murdered partner. It made him look good to the neighbors, and gave him somebody to sleep with."

"So they had it made," Vail concluded. "Between them, they owned the store and the second biggest spread in the neighborhood."

Longarm said, "They wanted it all. Pop made himself the postmaster and the local law. I reckon he didn't feel up to being the parson and the doc. There was enough open range up there for a dozen outfits as big as the Diamond M or Rocking K, but Kate was selfish, and so was her rival, Colonel Claymore. He was an old-fashioned cattle baron and a pain in the ass. The outfits had been feuding over government grass even before Kate took over. With Pa Bender as the law, Junior as her ramrod, and the colonel unpopular, they decided they could get away with wiping *him* out, too. But the close call in Kansas had taught them to act smoother. Everyone knew about the feud, and it was a closeknit community where a strange hired gun stood out. So Kate sent for some spiritualists she'd fooled about with in the East. She acted as Brother

Seth's spirit guide, transferred enough funds to him for the dreamer to move in and settle on open range, and sat back to wait for Colonel Claymore to act dumb."

Vail frowned and asked, "What do you mean? What was Claymore supposed to do about the squatters?"

"Run them out with guns and torches, of course. The man was a blustering bully, and the Benders figured he'd act true to form. He'd cloud up and rain all over those spooky fanatics and, in the confusion, it would be sort of tough to figure who was shooting who. Kate started recruiting gunslicks on the sly, since her inherited cowhands were local boys who might not be good at keeping family secrets. They must have aimed to wait until Claymore's brutalizing of the religious commune got to be the talk of the neighborhood. Then there'd be a sudden bloodbath and Pop, posing as a neutral lawman who'd been trying to keep the peace, would investigate the colonel's sudden demise and write it off as the work of disgruntled Utopians."

Vail nodded and said, "Too many suspects do confuse such doings. What went wrong with their flimflam?"

"The colonel wasn't the mule-headed bully they took him for. He told *me* he'd order me shot down like a dog, but he was all talk. Instead of riding the settlers down, he just wrote a few letters. As a retired field-grade officer, he had friends in the government. The Land Office got up an eviction notice and we were told to serve it."

"Right. But what happened to Harcourt when I sent him up there with the same?"

"He had rotten luck. Kate and Junior Bender were heading here to Denver to recruit some more guns. Harcourt had known the Benders back in Penn State, so the messed-up wanted fliers didn't fool him. He sent his wire and boarded the train south to keep an eye on them. But they'd recognized him, too. They somehow got the drop on Deputy Harcourt, killed him, and threw him off the train. Then they turned around and headed home. They might have gotten something

out of Harcourt. More likely, they just read the papers he was packing. Kate knew the plot against Claymore wasn't going to work the way it was supposed to. He'd messed them up by behaving civilized. So they had to pull in their horns and call off the war for the time being."

Vail frowned and asked, "Then how come you walked right into the middle of all that shooting?"

"Hell, Billy, can't you see it? They'd hired half a dozen gunslicks, and the rascals were all in Sunbonnet or on their way by then. When I met Kate, she knew who I was. She'd been to Denver more than once, and I'm sort of a landmark on Larimer Street. She pretended she thought I was a gunslick, and pointed out two of the men she wanted to get rid of, hoping I'd do her the favor of gunning them. They must have been sort of puzzled, since they thought they were working for her and I was butting in. They hoorahed me, and when I didn't scare, they followed us, not knowing exactly what they were supposed to do. After a few further misunderstandings, they got to Sunbonnet, where Spike just shot them, saying he did it to save my life. Later on, they shot my pony and a lady I'd made the acquaintance of, to make it look like somebody was after me. Meanwhile, they were trying to convince me how innocent they were. I have to admit, I ran around in some confused circles for a time."

"I got your telegrams. Get to the spooky parts."

"Oh, Kate saw no further need to feed the Church of Ancestral Wisdom, so she decided to move them on to greener pastures. We were getting a mite warm, and the colonel hadn't reacted right. She decided that as long as she was revealing things to Brother Seth, she might as well reinforce the old picture the law had of her. Knowing I'd be there, she flashed a picture of herself on the tent wall from outside, and spoke to us over a telephone speaker. I moved quick for a man my size, but all she had to do was drag her wired-up magic lantern away through the grass from maybe a quarter-mile away in the dark. I didn't act

as scared of spooks as I might have, and started asking questions of Brother Seth that they might not have expected me to. Maybe they aimed to kill him anyway. He was the only one who could have led us to the people backing his nonsense. The other followers were just lost lambs."

"That's when you wired that you'd seen Kate Bender and that the squatters were evicting themselves of their own free will, right?"

"Yep. That's when they started thinking of really killing me. Kate was sore at me for reasons I'd just as soon not talk about. I'd sent messages designed to throw everyone off the track, and kindly old Pop would be investigating my death in case there were any signs left behind. They sent their last hired guns to do me, but I got two of them instead. Pop jumped in all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed to help me, and ran into the schoolhouse to make sure of the last kid they'd left to mind their getaway mounts. He shot the boy, and as I came in, he shot at me, outlined in the doorway. I fired at his flash and got him. So scratch Old Man Bender off along with Ma."

"Leaving Kate and Junior."

"Right. From there on, it gets simple. They must have been a mite riled with me, even though I went along with the notion everyone had that Pop had been gunned by the boy he'd murdered. They blew my head off with a double-barreled ten-gauge, only my head ain't always on the pillow it's supposed to be on, thanks to my wild and wicked ways. By now I had it pretty well figured, but *proving* anything was likely to be a bitch. I set up a trap to trick Kate into some admissions before a witness, but as it turned out, the Lord finally got around to dealing with Kate as she deserved, and Spike just acted dumb and I had to shoot him. You can see what a hell of a mess all this would sound like under cross-examination before an official board of inquest. I'm having enough trouble with you butting into my tale."

Billy Vail shook his head wearily and said, "If I didn't know you, I'd think you made some of it up

while you were drinking. You must know you only have educated guesses to a lot of what you just told me. And what about the others? Even if it happened the way you said, you have some bodies left over!"

Longarm shrugged and said, "Yeah, the posse lit out after the Benders to avenge Pop, Kate, and Spike, who *were* Benders, and three more folks who had nothing to do with the Benders and just wound up dead in a love triangle. I knew I'd be tied up there for months if I told it like it had happened and, what the hell, I left things sort of tidier up in Sunbonnet by not having all the answers. You see—"

Billy Vail was staring, startled, past Longarm's head. He might have been ready to yell something, but Longarm didn't wait to listen. He dove forward and to one side as the wooden back of the booth exploded into kindling and toothpicks!

Longarm hit the floor as Vail fired across the table where he'd just been sitting, and a nine-pound sledge came down and smashed the table, sending glass and splinters in every direction. Longarm inched along the floor on his side as he drew his gun and peered back the way he'd just come. Billy Vail was pumping round after round into his own billowing gunsmoke, but the *thing* looming there wasn't going down. Ignoring the smaller man who'd just pumped five rounds into him, the giant with the sledgehammer held above his head was coming Longarm's way!

Longarm fired, still on his side, and rolled as the sledge crashed down and buried itself in the floorboards! Longarm ran out of floor, and as he felt the baseboard at his back, he slid up it to his feet, his gun trained into the blue haze filling the room. He called, "Billy?"

Vail yelled back, "Over here, on the deck!"

"Stay put," Longarm warned him, as he stood there in the corner, warily staring into the smoke as it started to clear. Outside, the piano had stopped playing, but nobody was likely to come into the back before at least one survivor came out to tell them what had happened.

A deep voice groaned, "I . . . kill . . ." and then there was a thud that shook the whole building. The smoke thinned enough to see through, and Longarm could make out the corpse lying facedown on the floor between him and Vail.

Vail got to his own feet and marveled, "He can't be much over six-four, now that he's stretched out quiet. I would have sworn to eight feet when I put all those bullets in him and he just kept going!"

Longarm covered the man they'd both shot as he rolled him over with a boot. The dead eyes stared up at him, still glazed with hate, and the yellow teeth were bared in his unshaven face.

Longarm said, "Now, that's more what I always had in mind for Junior Bender. Kate must have left him here in Denver to keep him clear of her plot to hog the range up in the Sand Hills."

Vail asked, "Then who in tarnation was Spike?"

Longarm said, "Beats hell out of me. The James boys recruit folks from outside the family, too. Spike said he'd shot a man in Kansas. They might have met him there. Kate had a way of getting men to do her bidding. Maybe now you see why I kept my report simple."

"Yeah, when you wipe out a den of rattlers, the details of the coils are too tedious to sort out."

The door burst open, and a uniformed Denver police officer cautiously asked, "What happened? They tell me two federal lawmen were in here when the shooting started."

Longarm looked at his boss. Vail hesitated and said, "Looks like some personal grudge the deceased had with my young sidekick, here."

The copper stared down at the dead man and said, "Jesus, he looks like some kind of maniac."

Vail said, "That's what he was, sure as hell. But it's over. He didn't get to do whatever it was he had in mind with that hammer he was packing in his pants leg. Would you mind taking over, Officer? We'll be at the bar if you need us, but I mean to reload my gun

and beer stein before I get around to signing your papers."

They went outside and bellied up to the bar before Longarm said, "That was understanding as hell of you, Billy."

Vail said, "You were right. We've got other cases pending, and I'm understaffed. We'd best write the whole mess off as neat as possible and forget about it. Where do you reckon the James boys or Billy the Kid might be, these days?"

"I ain't seen the Kid since I was in Lincoln County, and as for the James boys, I don't feel like looking tonight, Billy. You see that gal down the bar with the strawberry hair? She gets off work at midnight, and I'm trying to wean myself gently from redheads."

"Has she got a friend?"

"I could ask. Uh, how's your missus these days, old son?"

"Yeah, you're right. I'm getting too old for that sort of notion. But I'll tell you one thing, Longarm. I mean to go home good and *drunk*, at least. If I lose track of you in the next few hours, make sure you get to work on time in the morning. Fun is fun, but we've chewed up enough time on this last crazy case and we've got to catch up, chasing sensible wants."

Two more policemen came in as the saloon began to get back to normal. Longarm saw that Vail was moving off to jaw with them, but he stayed where he was, at the bar. The strawberry blonde came down the far side to give him a shotglass, a bottle, and a smile. Their hands touched as she served him, and Longarm glanced up at the clock behind her. It wouldn't be long now. He'd have time to finish up with the coppers and get a glow on, and it would be her quitting time. He watched her as she moved to serve another customer, and the smooth satin over her swaying rear quarters was admirable.

He didn't think Billy would really fire him if he got to the office a mite late in the morning.

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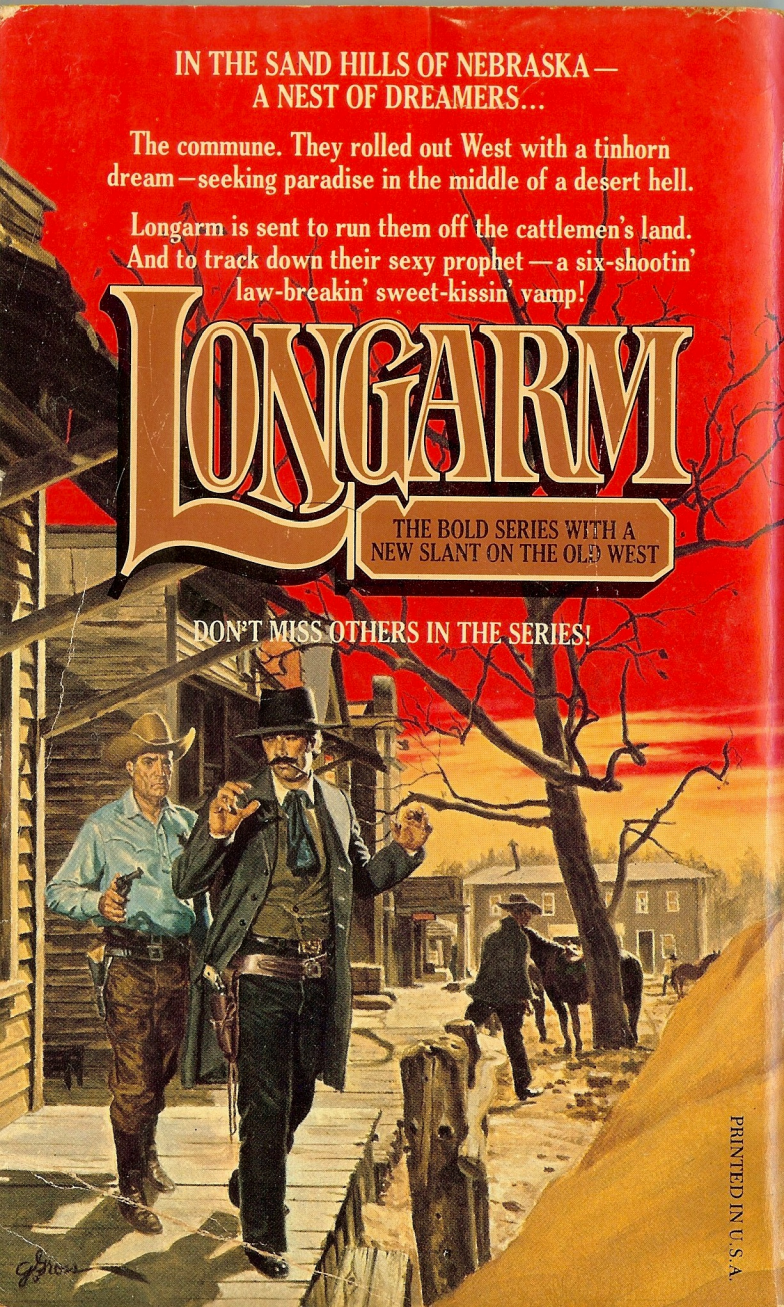

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